

CULTIVATING DELIBERATIVE DEMOCRACY THROUGH ADULT CIVIC  
EDUCATION: THE IDEAS AND WORK THAT SHAPED FARMER DISCUSSION  
GROUPS AND SCHOOLS OF PHILOSOPHY IN THE NEW DEAL  
DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE, LAND-GRANT UNIVERSITIES, AND  
COOPERATIVE EXTENSION SERVICE

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by

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Timothy Joseph Shaffer, Ph. D.

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This dissertation explores the ideas and philosophies of government administrators that animated a deliberative democracy effort which took place in rural communities in the 1930s and 1940s under the auspices of the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) in partnership with the Cooperative Extension Service and land-grant universities. It is the construction of a narrative about civic professionals cultivating spaces for citizens to become informed and educated about public problems. This deliberative democracy effort was an extraordinary attempt to take seriously the problem that people were not thought of as citizens and that there were implications when we failed to recognize them as such.

This dissertation is based on a central question: how did government administrators function as civic professionals committed to helping people become informed and engaged citizens? This study is told as a prophetic narrative, emphasizing the thoughts and ideas of those who brought these efforts to life. As a historical study, this dissertation explores the development of institutions such as land-grant universities, Cooperative Extension, and the USDA. It also focuses on the ideas and actions of key leaders, such as M. L. Wilson, Henry A. Wallace, and Carl F.

Tausch, who brought farmer discussion groups and Schools of Philosophy for Extension Workers to life. It concludes with lessons for today's scholars and practitioners of the university engagement and the civic renewal movements.



## BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Timothy Joseph Shaffer was born in Portsmouth, Ohio to William M. and Elizabeth J. Shaffer in 1982. Growing up as one of four children, he graduated from Clay High School in 2000. In August 2000, he enrolled at St. Bonaventure University in St. Bonaventure, New York. It was there that he began to explore questions about how we live well with one another and the world around us. He was involved with various campus and community activities, namely being involved with Mt. Irenaeus, a Franciscan Mountain Retreat and the Warming House, a local community kitchen. He received a B.A. in theology with a minor in philosophy magna cum laude from St. Bonaventure University in 2004.

Wanting to continue studies in theology, he enrolled at the University of Dayton and served as a Graduate Assistant in Campus Ministry. It was through that role that he further developed a sense of identity connected to exploring questions about faith and culture. He received an M.A. in theological studies in 2006 and returned to Western New York to work as Vice President of Ministry and Coordinator of Mt. Irenaeus Ministries, Programs, and Activities for St. Bonaventure University at Mt. Irenaeus.

After briefly serving in that role, he returned to academia and pursued an M.P.A. at the University of Dayton. It was during this time that he worked as a Graduate Assistant in the Fitz Center for Leadership in Community serving as both co-coordinator of the Rivers Institute and coordinator of what would become the Graduate Community Fellows program. Simultaneous to working at the Fitz Center, Tim also worked as a Research Assistant at the Charles F. Kettering Foundation. He completed his degree in 2008.

In January 2009, Tim enrolled at Cornell University and began studies in the Field of Education. He worked as a Graduate Research Assistant to Scott J. Peters, Ph.D. on a project entitled, “Cooperative Extension’s Roles in Cultivating and Sustaining Democratic Publics: An Action Research Initiative” with Theodore R. Alter at Pennsylvania State University. During his first year at Cornell, Tim was selected to be part of the inaugural Summer Institute of Civic Studies held at Tufts University, helping to shape his scholarly interests and his desire to help develop the emerging field of “civic studies.”

Before completing his degree, Tim returned to the Kettering Foundation as a Research Associate in 2012 and then became Director of the Center for Leadership and Engagement at Wagner College in New York City in 2013. Tim is married to Ellen Shaffer. They have two daughters, Jane and Margaret.

To those who cultivate democracy and to make it work as it should.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

During his fateful trip to Asia in 1968, Thomas Merton reflected on his experience at Kanchenjunga, the third highest mountain in the world and part of the Himalayas. In his journal entry for November 19, 1968, he wrote this: “There is another side of Kanchenjunga and of every mountain—the side that has never been photographed and turned into postcards. That is the only side worth seeing.”<sup>1</sup> As I reflect back on the journey that has led me to this point in my doctoral program, this quote from Merton captures a sense of what this work has meant to me.

I had no intention of studying or writing about Cooperative Extension, land-grant universities, or the United States Department of Agriculture. But like many good things in life, opportunities seem to emerge when least expected and my chance to study at Cornell University would easily fall within such a category. While I was completing a master’s degree at the University of Dayton and working in the Fitz Center for Leadership in Community, I also had the good fortune to spend time at Charles F. Kettering Foundation in Dayton, Ohio. It was a great mix of being involved in higher education’s engagement work through the Fitz Center and an opportunity to explore extensively the scholarly side through the Kettering Foundation. It was during my time at the Kettering Foundation that I met Scott J. Peters from Cornell University. I had read some of his publications and found that my interests aligned with his in many ways. Only months after meeting Scott, I was moving to Ithaca, New York, to begin my doctoral program at Cornell.

Although I had never been part of the land-grant university or Extension system, Scott helped me to see the ways in which higher education’s democratic promise owes a great deal to the public institutions created through the Morrill Act of 1862. Situating myself as part of the university engagement movement, I was struck by the historical

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<sup>1</sup> Thomas Merton, *The Other Side of the Mountain: The End of the Journey*, ed. Patrick Hart (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1998), 284.

roots of the university going beyond campus as something both historical and contemporary. I felt like I was seeing a side of the mountain few others ever know exists.

I owe a great deal to a number of people, but first and foremost Scott J. Peters deserves recognition for his passion, support, and understanding as I have developed my own thinking about what it means to be someone in higher education committed to making democracy work as it should. Scott is a scholar who has spent his professional career helping others to see and understand historical and contemporary stories of individuals and institutions committed to making their work “public work,” as Harry Boyte defines it. Scott has mentored me from well before I was admitted to Cornell to the final drafts of this dissertation. He has had tremendous patience with me. Thank you, Scott. I am indebted to my other committee members, John F. Forester, and Daniel J. Decker, especially while I was at Cornell taking courses and talking through ideas with them.

I must also acknowledge the intellectual community associated with the Kettering Foundation. As a member of a research team working on a Kettering funded project, I was afforded the opportunity to spend time with scholars from across the country who were working, in their own contexts, to not only improve the work that universities did in communities but to improve democracy itself. This was and is not an easy task, but I have been inspired by the commitment so many have to this never-ending project. In particular, I want to name Theodore R. Alter, Alice Diebel, Frank A. Fear, Jan Hartough, and Wynne Wright. Frank, Jan, and Wynne were particularly helpful as I was beginning to think about a dissertation topic. They helped me see the connections this historical project has to current challenges and opportunities.

As a project reliant on historical sources, I owe a great deal to the many librarians and archivists who helped me along the way. The support staff at Cornell University Libraries, and particularly the Albert R. Mann Library, was essential to my

research. Had it not been for them and their ability to help me find or retrieve materials, I don't think this dissertation would have been possible. In the same breadth, I should also commend Cornell University Library for maintaining such a collection. There were many times that Cornell held one of if not the only copy of certain documents. Were it not for the institution's commitment to preserving this historical record, entire generations of work and scholarship would be lost or extremely difficult to access. In addition, I want to acknowledge the various other libraries or archives consulted during the research and writing of this dissertation. These include: National Archives and Records Administration, National Agricultural Library, Michigan State University, Montana State University, Columbia University, University of Vermont, Ohio State University, Kansas State University, and the Charles F. Kettering Foundation.

Finally, I want to thank my family. As someone who has been described as a "perpetual student," I have spent many years studying, taking courses, and writing papers. As I complete my formal education at Cornell, I would be remiss if I did not acknowledge the support for such a vocation. It is only now, after the fact, that I realize what a gift it was for my parents to support me in my educational pursuits. Finally, I want to thank my wife, Ellen, for her support. We have grown together since I began my doctoral studies and she has made many significant sacrifices to enable me to pursue my desire to be a civic professional working to change higher education and our world. I hope we might find more time to spend with one another rather than putting off time together for the sake of revising drafts of my dissertation.

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## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

Agricultural Adjustment Administration	AAA
Bureau of Agricultural Economics	BAE
Michigan State University	MSU
Michigan State University College of Agriculture and Natural Resources	CANR
Program Study and Discussion Section/Division	PSD
United States Department of Agriculture	USDA

## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION AND OVERVIEW

“To plan for democracy’s future, we need to know its past.” – John Gastil and William M. Keith<sup>1</sup>

“...we use our histories to remember ourselves, just as we use our prophesies as tools for exploring what we do or do not wish to become.” – William Cronon<sup>2</sup>

#### *The Farmer as a Citizen and the Professional as Civic*

“Perhaps we haven’t given enough attention to the farmer as a citizen,” United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) Assistant Secretary M. L. Wilson said to government and university administrators gathered together in the winter of 1935. They were exploring the possibility of creating a new adult education program based on discussion methods that would reach people in communities across the country through local Cooperative Extension agents.<sup>3</sup> While speaking to a particular audience concerned about how rural men and women were dealing with complex agricultural and economic issues in addition to larger topics such as their role in a democracy, Wilson’s statement touched on an important issue with broad relevance both then and now: professionals in public institutions have neither viewed themselves as civic professionals nor have they given enough attention to people as citizens who want to

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<sup>1</sup> John Gastil and William M. Keith, "A Nation That (Sometimes) Likes to Talk," in *The Deliberative Democracy Handbook: Strategies for Effective Civic Engagement in the Twenty-First Century*, ed. John Gastil and Peter Levin (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2005), 4.

<sup>2</sup> William Cronon, "A Place for Stories: Nature, History, and Narrative," *The Journal of American History* 78, no. 4 (1992): 1369.

<sup>3</sup> United States Department of Agriculture, *Preliminary Report of the Forum and Discussion Group Project, United States Department of Agriculture, 1934-1935* (n.p.: United States Department of Agriculture, 1935), 5.

talk about and understand the issues impacting their lives.<sup>4</sup> With so many challenges facing the United States of America in the 1930s such as economic decline in both urban and rural communities and environmental disasters such as the Dust Bowl covering larger portions of the country, what was to be done?

The response from Wilson and his colleagues was not quite what one might expect from senior administrators in a federal agency. Instead of only trying to “fix” things as might be predicted from a government agency in a time of such crisis, Wilson, USDA Secretary Henry A. Wallace, colleague Carl F. Taeusch, and others intentionally chose to also support educational work that emphasized the importance of citizens—“ordinary” men and women—talking with one another and discussing issues together as a constitutive element of a democratic society. These administrators were arguing for a kind of democracy and citizenship in which people were willing to

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<sup>4</sup> Concern about the lack of attention to citizens as civic actors has been central to what has been referred to as the civic renewal movement in recent decades. This movement has attempted to articulate a vision and an approach that values the knowledge and experience of men and women. On the development of this movement, see Jane Mansbridge, *Beyond Adversary Democracy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983); Benjamin R. Barber, *Strong Democracy: Participatory Politics for a New Age* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984); Robert K. Fullinwider, ed. *Civil Society, Democracy, and Civic Renewal* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 1999); David Mathews, *Politics for People: Finding a Responsible Public Voice*, Second ed. (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1999); Carmen Sirianni and Lewis A. Friedland, *Civic Innovation in America: Community Empowerment, Public Policy, and the Movement for Civic Renewal* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001); Harry C. Boyte, *Everyday Politics: Reconnecting Citizens and Public Life* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004); Carmen Sirianni and Lewis A. Friedland, *The Civic Renewal Movement: Community Building and Democracy in the United States* (Dayton, OH: Kettering Foundation Press, 2005); Peter Levine, *We Are the Ones We Have Been Waiting For: The Promise of Civic Renewal in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013); David Mathews, *The Ecology of Democracy: Finding Ways to Have a Stronger Hand in Shaping Our Future* (Dayton, OH: Kettering Foundation Press, 2014). Numerous organizations play an important role by working with citizens to help them recognize themselves as civic actors and as being capable of understanding complex public problems. For brief introductions to and overviews of this landscape and the diverse groups and organizations doing this work, see Lawrence R. Jacobs, Fay Lomax Cook, and Michael X. Delli Carpini, *Talking Together: Public Deliberation and Political Participation in America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 135-151; Matt Leighninger, "Mapping Deliberative Civic Engagement: Pictures from a (R)Evolution," in *Democracy in Motion: Evaluating the Practice and Impact of Deliberative Civic Engagement*, ed. Tina Nabatchi, et al. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012); Susan Clark and Woden Teachout, *Slow Democracy: Rediscovering Community, Bringing Decision Making Back Home* (White River Junction, VT: Chelsea Green, 2012), 209-211.

identify and articulate their interests, beliefs, and values alongside others. In short, what they were attempting to cultivate was a kind of democratic practice through which people were willing to talk, listen, and learn with others instead of only trying to have their own interests met.<sup>5</sup>

For Wilson and his colleagues, government agencies and institutions of higher education had crucial roles in cultivating an educated citizenry by providing resources and opportunities for men and women to gather together and discuss issues that mattered to them. As the “experts,” they were not simply interested in identifying problems; instead, these administrators helped create the infrastructure to do something about them.<sup>6</sup> Discussion programs offered a distinctly different approach to the relationships among a federal agency, state colleges and universities, community educators, and ordinary men and women by asking professionals to convene people rather than provide to them technical responses or information. This work, importantly, took place alongside other USDA programs. While the USDA conducted basic research into problems such as soil erosion and rural sociologists studied changes in rural communities, the Department was also producing resources for

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<sup>5</sup> The prominence of self interest, and its more organized embodiment as “interest group politics,” has been part of the American political landscape since its inception. As Robert Dahl put it, “despite popular myths to the contrary, interest-group politics is as old as the republic itself.” See Robert A. Dahl, *The New American Political (Dis)Order* (Berkeley, CA: Institute of Governmental Studies Press, University of California, Berkeley, 1994), 7. Theodore Lowi would write about this important phenomenon and the role of “interest-group liberalism” in Theodore J. Lowi, *The End of Liberalism: Ideology, Policy, and the Crisis of Public Authority* (New York: Norton, 1969). The use of “ordinary” here is neither derogatory nor is it meant to demean. Rather, it helps to draw a contrast between those in professional roles with education and training (described earlier as “experts”) with others whose knowledge and experience are not necessarily found in credentials.

<sup>6</sup> Albert W. Dzur would write decades later about the important role that professionals needed to play to “enable the very citizen participation in public deliberation” that opponents to the overreliance on professionalization to address public problems. See Albert W. Dzur, *Democratic Professionalism: Citizen Participation and the Reconstruction of Professional Ethics, Identity, and Practice* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2008), 80.

communities to talk about what policy decisions should be made—what was described in one of the USDA Farmer Discussion Group Pamphlets as “one of the most important jobs ahead” for Americans.<sup>7</sup>

While critics viewed them as being in tension and something that the Department needed to correct, certain administrators viewed technical expertise embodied in professionals and discussion-based programs as being complementary to one another. Despite the fact that much of what the USDA did was not reliant on citizens discussing and deliberating issues, Wilson, Wallace, Taeusch, and others wanted discussion to be the cornerstone of how the USDA would approach its work in and with communities, helping to redefine what it meant to be a professional in both government agencies and at universities.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Olaf F. Larson and Julie N. Zimmerman, "The USDA's Bureau of Agricultural Economics and Sociological Studies of Rural Life and Agricultural Issues, 1919-1953," *Agricultural History* 74, no. 2 (2000); ———, *Sociology in Government: The Galpin-Taylor Years in the U.S. Department of Agriculture, 1919-1953* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2003); "What Kind of Agricultural Policy Is Necessary to Save Our Soil?," *Farmer Discussion Group Pamphlet* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Agriculture; The Extension Service; Agricultural Adjustment Administration, 1936), 1.

<sup>8</sup> Coming of age and educated in the Progressive Era, Wallace, Wilson, and Taeusch embodied that period's commitment to certain values such as democratic participation as a way of life rather than only looking to solve problems, regardless of how that might be accomplished. This stood in contrast to the other hallmark of the Progressive Era: a modern, technocratic, and efficient bureaucratic structure and state. Government agencies and higher education both embraced this second pillar of Progressivism more so than the first. William Sullivan articulates succinctly the tension of the Progressive Era between technocratic and democratic approaches to public problems: "...Progressivism contained within itself contradictory tendencies. On the one hand, many Progressives promoted scientific expertise and technical efficiency as the keys to a more advanced form of society. On the other hand, Progressives also looked to civic ideals that seemed to require a moral and political integration of life which could only be achieved if modern citizens could be educated to a high level of public participation. Were social action and political reform to be conceived as tools wielded by superior experts or as processes of mutual involvement between civic educators and organizers seeking to enlist a broad public? This opposition within the movement was simultaneously played out in the evolution of the professions as the tension between technical and civic models of professionalism." William M. Sullivan, *Work and Integrity: The Crisis and Promise of Professionalism in America* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2005), 101. On the challenging of democratic engagement in the Progressive Era also see Kevin Mattson, *Creating a Democratic Public: The Struggle for Urban Participatory Democracy During the Progressive Era* (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1998).

I could explore the challenge of looking beyond a narrow focus on technical competence to more socially responsive roles for professionals and in a variety of contexts.<sup>9</sup> I decided to focus on a historical account of an extraordinary attempt by federal government administrators and university educators who chose to take seriously the idea that people living in rural communities needed to become informed and engaged citizens so that they could impact their communities, local institutions, and national policy positively. The dissertation is about the ideas and philosophies animating professionals who shaped two interrelated adult civic education initiatives that would come to be known as the Program Study and Discussion (PSD) unit within the USDA.<sup>10</sup>

For the civic renewal movement and university engagement in higher education, this story is interesting because the New Deal USDA was an unlikely place for what we would today refer to as deliberative democracy.<sup>11</sup> Talk about democracy

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<sup>9</sup> William M. Sullivan argues that professionals ideally, “deploy technical expertise and judgment not only skillfully but also for public-regarding ends and in a public-regarding way.” Elsewhere he writes that, “Professional life is concerned with applying trained intelligence to the business of modern life. It is also about bringing the intricacies of technical processes within the sphere of moral meaning and social purpose.” William M. Sullivan, “Engaging the Civic Option: A New Academic Professionalism,” *Campus Compact Reader* Summer (2003): 10; ———, *Work and Integrity*, 180-181.

<sup>10</sup> The goal of this dissertation is not to prove or measure the degree of influence or impact the USDA had on citizens who participated in deliberative discussions of the impact group discussion had on local, state, or national policy. Instead, it is an intellectual history about the ideas that shaped the work of the Program Study and Discussion unit of the USDA and the responses to that work.

<sup>11</sup> Deliberative democracy is an expansive field of both theory and practice. It is a conception of liberal democracy that is fundamentally based on the premise that decisions should be made through discussion among free and equal citizens. Deliberative democracy is one of the most prominent conceptions of democracy today. In its classic version, deliberative democracy is based on two principles: reasoning between people rather than bargaining or aggregating private preferences and having the giving, weighing, acceptance, or rejection of reasons be a public act. Through the sharing of information and knowledge, public deliberation can transform individuals’ understandings and grasp of complex problems and allow them to see elements of the issue they had not considered previously. The ability to rely on public reasoning has led some to believe that “deliberative democracy is the best conception of democratic procedure because it can generate ‘best’ decisions; that is, produce outcomes that are the most thoroughly examined, justified and, hence, legitimate,” David Held writes. Participants in deliberative democracy must be willing to consider arguments offered on their merits. Individuals listen

could easily be abstract or esoteric, but the ideas and discussions that will be described below were intentionally about topics and issues that mattered to them. The significance of this story is that these discussion efforts engaged people about mud-on-the-boots types of issues—topics such as farm ownership, taxes, soil erosion, and trade agreements with other countries.<sup>12</sup>

Additionally, university educators and other professionals were invited to think about themselves as civic professionals engaged in public life and not just as individuals utilizing their expertise in technical work, reclaiming an earlier model of professionalism that was based on what has been referred to as “social trusteeship.” This acknowledges that there are, as Scott J. Peters notes, two main aspects of professional practice: “a technical aspect having to do with the competent performance of skilled work, and a social aspect that grounds and guides professionals in an appreciation of the larger public ends they serve.”<sup>13</sup> In a 1940 USDA publication, these two aspects of professional practice are expressed:

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and participate with openness to the reasons given for various perspectives on an issue. See John S. Dryzek, *Deliberative Democracy and Beyond: Liberals, Critics, Contestations* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000); John Parkinson, *Deliberating in the Real World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 3; David Held, *Models of Democracy*, Third ed. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006), 237-238; Amy Gutmann and Dennis F. Thompson, *Why Deliberative Democracy?* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), 1-63; Leighninger, "Mapping Deliberative Civic Engagement: Pictures from a (R)Evolution."; Gastil and Keith, "A Nation That (Sometimes) Likes to Talk."

<sup>12</sup> For a complete list of discussion topics, see Appendix B.

<sup>13</sup> Sullivan, *Work and Integrity*, 9; Steven Brint, *In an Age of Experts: The Changing Role of Professionals in Politics and Public Life* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), 203-205; Scott J. Peters, *Democracy and Higher Education: Traditions and Stories of Civic Engagement* (East Lansing, MI: Michigan State University Press, 2010), 11. For some of the recent literature on civic professionalism see Sullivan, "Engaging the Civic Option."; Scott J. Peters, "Reconstructing Civic Professionalism in Academic Life: A Response to Mark Wood's Paper, "from Service to Solidarity", " *Journal of Higher Education Outreach and Engagement* 8, no. 2 (2003); ———, "Educating the Civic Professional: Reconfigurations and Resistances," *Michigan Journal of Community Service-Learning* 11, no. 1 (2004); Sullivan, *Work and Integrity*; Dzur, *Democratic Professionalism*; Harry C. Boyte and Eric Fretz, "Civic Professionalism," *Journal of Higher Education Outreach and Engagement* 14, no. 2 (2010); Brint, *In an Age of Experts*.



“...the planning for public farm policies and programs should represent the opinions that have been formed by farmers with the advice and help of the experts. As it has been put by H. R. Tolley, Chief of the Bureau of Agricultural Economics, ‘The expert must be the counselor, the citizen the one who decides.’”<sup>14</sup>

The role of the professional was to help and support citizens as they made decisions regarding the issues that impacted their lives. Too often however, professionalism can often “lock individuals into a narrow focus upon technical competence...to the exclusion of all other considerations.” At its best, however, “professionalism is far more than that.” Sullivan continues by noting when work that has, “ends of social importance, an individual’s skills and aspirations acquire value for others.”

Professionals have expertise, but what makes them civic professionals is the way they employ that knowledge to meet public-regarding ends in a public-regarding way. They embody a manifestation of professionalism that is “both expert and civic.”<sup>15</sup>

In a similar way, Albert Dzur notes how professionals can serve as facilitators in democratic work by helping citizens gain competence to address issues and to share the tasks of democracy, even though such a move takes away the professional’s own power and status. Dzur emphasizes the need for a “new normative core of professionalism” comprised of task sharing and greater involvement of citizens in addressing public problems. Similarly, as Frank Fischer put it, collective citizen participation is “seldom something that simply happens.” It must be “organized, facilitated, and even nurtured.” There is an important role for professionals, one that draws on both their expertise as well as their ability to share responsibility and

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<sup>14</sup> Bureau of Agricultural Economics et al., *Land Use Planning under Way* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1940), 3.

<sup>15</sup> Sullivan, *Work and Integrity*, 30-31, 196; ———, “Engaging the Civic Option,” 10.

leadership. Dzur, who is a political theorist, goes so far as to say that professionals are the “missing agents” of contemporary democratic thought especially when speaking about deliberative democracy.<sup>16</sup>

Thinking about themselves as *civic professionals* can help today’s scholars and practitioners in higher education and beyond recognize that those who have come before them also dealt with complex or “wicked” problems, their roles in responding to challenges, and how they have articulated a vision for higher education’s public role and purpose, or what is commonly referred to as the civic engagement movement.<sup>17</sup>

Contributing to the long history of experimentation in democratic practice and the tension about the relationship between the individual and community found within the dominant public philosophies that have shaped the American experience, Wilson and other administrators in the USDA deliberately chose to experiment by creating a nationwide project based on the premise that engaged and knowledgeable citizens were critical to making democracy work. They were doing this work because they

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<sup>16</sup> Frank Fischer, *Citizens, Experts, and the Environment: The Politics of Local Knowledge* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2000), xi; Dzur, *Democratic Professionalism*, 255, 213.

<sup>17</sup> On the concept of “wicked” problems, see Horst W. J. Rittel and Melvin M. Webber, “Dilemmas in a General Theory of Planning,” *Policy Sciences* 4, no. 2 (1973); Martín Carcasson and Leah Sprain, “Deliberative Democracy and Adult Civic Education,” *New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education* 2012, no. 135 (2012); Wynne Wright, “Wicked Bedfellows: Can Science and Democracy Coexist in the Land Grant?,” *Higher Education Exchange* (2012). The literature on today’s higher education civic engagement movement as it relates to questions about public roles and purposes includes, among others, Robert G. Bringle, Richard Games, and Edward A. Malloy, eds., *Colleges and Universities as Citizens* (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1999); Adrianna J. Kezar, Tony C. Chambers, and John C. Burkhardt, eds., *Higher Education for the Public Good: Emerging Voices for a National Movement* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2005); H.E. Fitzgerald, C. Burack, and S. D. Seifer, eds., *Handbook of Engaged Scholarship: Contemporary Landscapes, Future Directions*, vol. 1 & 2 (East Lansing, MI: Michigan State University, 2010); John Saltmarsh and Matthew Hartley, eds., *“To Serve a Larger Purpose”: Engagement for Democracy and the Transformation of Higher Education* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2011). This is an extensive and growing field of study. As Ariane Hoy and Matthew Johnson note, “The community engagement *movement* in higher education, or some might say *field*, is at a critical moment.” Ariane Hoy and Matthew Johnson, “Preface,” in *Deepening Community Engagement in Higher Education: Forging New Pathways*, ed. Ariane Hoy and Matthew Johnson (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), xvi.

believed that both professionals and farmers needed to understand the very real problems facing the country. And, through discussion, they could become better informed about appropriate responses to the challenges.

Land-grant universities, through the Cooperative Extension Service, could help support educational programs that provided men and women with opportunities to learn about issues impacting their lives, communities, and country. Importantly, this approach helping people understand issues through education was foundational to Extension. As Scott J. Peters has noted, “extension agents were not (and are not today) charged with the exclusive and narrow task of handing out scientific facts and information. As originally conceived, they were to function as both teachers and organizers, bringing land-grant faculty and community members together in public work projects that included but also ranged well beyond technical problem-solving.”<sup>18</sup> Wilson and other USDA administrators based their project on the idea that individuals, in relationship with others, needed to better understand what was shaping their lives in order to respond to the challenges they faced. But the idea of widespread discussion ran counter to many professional norms of universities as well as cultural and political norms of the United States.

Rather explicitly, the United States was founded as a representative republic rather than a democracy because of, among other concerns, fear of mob rule and uneducated and ill-informed citizens making decisions with wide effects. The entire American constitutional order was established and structured as a “bulwark against the

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<sup>18</sup> Peters, *Democracy and Higher Education*, 40.

flawed process by which citizens reached decisions.”<sup>19</sup> Representative democracy is replete with concerns about what an uneducated populace might do if they had the ability to participate in direct democracy.<sup>20</sup> As Sean Wilentz writes, “It was one thing, these city and country democrats pointed out, to speak of establishing a kingless republican government and of vaunting the public good. It was quite another to specify what kind of republics the new American governments, state and national, would be.... How ‘democratick’ the governments produced by the American Revolution actually were was open to dispute then, and still is.” Democracy was held in low regard while a “properly constituted republican government” was widely valued as long as it stood for the “commonweal or ‘public good’ (which was a common rendering of *res publica* at the time).” Democracy was rule by the “commons” or *demos* while a republic was ruled *in common for* the commonweal.<sup>21</sup>

Since that time, American political thought and practice has been rooted primarily in two traditions. The first is broadly defined by republican commitments to a shared sense of public life in relationship with other citizens. The second, liberalism, focuses on the rights of the individual citizens and is more common today. It shapes

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<sup>19</sup> Jacobs, Cook, and Delli Carpini, *Talking Together: Public Deliberation and Political Participation in America*, 5.

<sup>20</sup> Bernard Manin makes a very strong statement about “direct” and “representative” democracy in that what we call the latter “has its origins in a system of institutions (established in the wake of the English, American, and French revolutions) that was in no way initially perceived as a form of democracy or of government by the people” Bernard Manin, *The Principles of Representative Government* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 1. Building on Manin but taking a different position, Urbinati makes an argument that representative democracy is “neither aristocratic nor a defective substitute for direct democracy, but a way for democracy to constantly recreate itself and improve” Nadia Urbinati, *Representative Democracy: Principles and Genealogy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 223.

<sup>21</sup> Sean Wilentz, *The Rise of American Democracy: Jefferson to Lincoln* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2005), 9; Russell L. Hanson, “Democracy,” in *Political Innovation and Conceptual Change*, ed. Terence Ball, James Farr, and Russell L. Hanson (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 77.

American life in such a pervasive way that it almost seems to be the only way American democracy has been understood and practiced. Nevertheless, the public philosophy of liberalism informing today's debates about the role of the government, citizens, and institutions, has really only solidified its dominant position since the middle of the twentieth century. Michael J. Sandel argues both the republican and liberal conceptions of society have "been present throughout our political experience, but in shifting measure and relative importance. Broadly speaking, republicanism predominated earlier in American history, liberalism later." Importantly, there were not clean transitions between these two public philosophies. While the United States was established as a representational republic, the founders recognized the importance and necessity of individual rights and freedoms. Our public philosophies continue to wrestle with these tensions.<sup>22</sup>

During the 1930s and 1940s, the tensions between these two traditions play out in addition to the increasingly significant role of government and of the "expert."<sup>23</sup> Wilson's citizen-centered discussion model was in sharp contrast with the dominant model that relied on the expertise and administrative capacities of centralized and bureaucratic structures, demonstrated most dramatically in James C. Scott's magisterial study on the subject of high-modernist ideology, government planning,

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<sup>22</sup> Michael J. Sandel, *Democracy's Discontent: America in Search of a Public Philosophy* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1996), 6. Christopher K. Ansell has written about public philosophy as a "bridge between the past, the present and the future. From the past, it builds on a living tradition of thought characterized by certain themes and values. In the present, a public philosophy addresses contemporary public problems of political and social life, providing a guide to analysis and suggesting strategies for addressing these problems. Looking ahead, a public philosophy helps us to imagine different possible futures." Christopher K. Ansell, *Pragmatist Democracy: Evolutionary Learning as Public Philosophy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 184.

<sup>23</sup> On the role of the expert and the closely aligned topic of professionalism emerging from higher education, see Brint, *In an Age of Experts*; Frank Fischer, *Technocracy and the Politics of Expertise* (Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications, 1990); Sullivan, *Work and Integrity*.

and “seeing like a state.” This dominant model relied on technical expertise removed from the lived realities of communities rather than the knowledge and experiences of ordinary men and women when engaging in planning or creating policy.<sup>24</sup> Scott’s critiques are not simply historical occurrences. The notion that citizens have little to contribute to the functioning of society continues to be pervasive.<sup>25</sup> For these reasons, exploring the tensions among different public philosophies becomes important because there is not a single idea about what democracy is or what it should be.<sup>26</sup> But this particular story was almost not told.

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<sup>24</sup> This phrase, “seeing like a state,” comes from James C. Scott’s study of centralized efforts at planning and the many limitations and failures of such an approach. See James C. Scott, *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1998). Cf. Peter Levine, “Seeing Like a Citizen: The Contributions of Elinor Ostrom to ‘Civic Studies,’” *The Good Society* 20, no. 1 (2011).

<sup>25</sup> For example, see Bryan Douglas Caplan, *The Myth of the Rational Voter: Why Democracies Choose Bad Policies* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007); Ilya Somin, *Democracy and Political Ignorance: Why Smaller Government Is Better* (Stanford, CA: Stanford Law Books, 2013).

<sup>26</sup> Political philosopher Michael J. Sandel writes about public philosophy as the, “political theory implicit in our practice, the assumptions about citizenship and freedom that inform our public life.” For him, public philosophy provided a “cognitive framework for thinking about politics.” Sandel, along with others such as Harry Boyte, have offered conceptions of democracy that are formative rather than procedural, emphasizing the work of citizens in creating society rather than adhering to a rights-based liberal ethic built on individual rights and little expectation that citizens should or needed to share a telos. Michael J. Sandel, *Democracy’s Discontent: America in Search of a Public Philosophy* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1996), 4; Eric C. Sands, *American Public Philosophy and the Mystery of Lincolnism* (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 2009), 7; Harry C. Boyte and Nancy N. Kari, *Building America: The Democratic Promise of Public Work* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1996); Boyte, *Everyday Politics*.

In a contribution to a collection of essays responding to Sandel’s influential *Democracy’s Discontent*, William A. Galston importantly echoes Sandel’s sentiment that public philosophy is not simply some abstract political concept without meaning to people’s lives. Instead it is “rooted in, and addressed to, a particular public in a specific historical situation” and links abstract political propositions with specific conceptions of socio-political institutions. In this way, public philosophy becomes real in the world because it “goes beyond principles and institutions to specify general directions for public policy within a basic understanding of how the world works.” Finally, Galston contends, public philosophy represents an effort to solve specific public problems. In sum, a public philosophy has significance and meaning because theories can animate and shape the lives of individuals and institutions. Sandel, *Democracy’s Discontent*, 4; Eric C. Sands, *American Public Philosophy and the Mystery of Lincolnism* (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 2009), 7; Harry C. Boyte and Nancy N. Kari, *Building America: The Democratic Promise of Public Work* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1996); Boyte, *Everyday Politics*; William A. Galston, “Political Economy and the Politics of Virtue: U.S. Public Philosophy at Century’s End,” in *Debating*

### ***This is Not the Dissertation I Had in Mind***

I had no intention of writing this dissertation, at least not at first. My project was to be focused on engaged scholarship by land-grant university faculty and Cooperative Extension educators from Michigan State University (MSU) using deliberative approaches to resolve contested issues in agriculture and natural resources with support from the Charles F. Kettering Foundation.<sup>27</sup> They were Jan Hartough, a longtime Extension educator and Statewide Coordinator of Public Deliberation with MSU Extension; Wynne Wright, an assistant sociology professor in MSU's College of Agriculture and Natural Resources (CANR); and Frank Fear, a sociology professor and senior associate dean in CANR.<sup>28</sup> I spent time in Michigan speaking with them in addition to interviewing citizens, Extension educators, faculty members, and university administrators. I was trying to figure out how many case studies to conduct. My qualitative dissertation was moving forward and the pieces were coming together.

At the heart of their work at MSU was the belief that civic engagement, operationalized through dialogue and deliberation, could help "bridge the divides"

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*Democracy's Discontent: Essays on American Politics, Law, and Public Philosophy*, ed. Anita L. Allen and Milton C. Regan Jr. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 64-65.

<sup>27</sup> The Kettering Foundation is a nonprofit, nonpartisan, nongovernmental research foundation interested in understanding what it takes to "make democracy work as it should." The foundation's research suggests that democracy working as it should occurs when citizens are civically engaged and can make sound choices about their future, communities of citizens act together to address common problems, and institutions with public legitimacy contribute to strengthening the work of citizens. See *What Does the Kettering Foundation Do?*, (Dayton, OH: Kettering Foundation, 2012).

<sup>28</sup> For very brief introductions to the Cooperative Extension system and how its work has been understood, see H. C. Sanders, "A Brief History," in *The Cooperative Extension Service*, ed. H. C. Sanders (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1966); Timothy J. Shaffer, "The Land Grant System and Graduate Education: Reclaiming a Narrative of Engagement," in *Collaborative Futures: Critical Reflections on Publicly Active Graduate Education*, ed. Amanda Gilvin, Georgia M. Robert, and Craig Martin (Syracuse, NY: The Graduate School Press of Syracuse University, 2012), 58-62; Scott J. Peters, "It's Not Just Providing Information: Perspectives on the Purposes and Significance of Extension Work," in *Catalyzing Change: Profiles of Cornell Cooperative Extension Educators from Greene, Tompkins, and Erie Counties, New York*, ed. Scott J. Peters, et al. (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University, 2006).

among citizens and professionals who held “dissimilar values, beliefs, and preferences—differences that [were] sources of interpersonal conflict, tension, and struggle.” They worked with various communities and the issues they addressed between 2007 and 2010 included the consumption of fresh, unprocessed, whole milk; deer management in urban settings; the rising cost of food and food citizenship; the spread of bovine tuberculosis; water issues; a non-motorized recreation trail; animal welfare; and the role of biomass fuels in Michigan’s energy future.<sup>29</sup>

Many of the problems related to agriculture and natural resources were nontechnical, arising from “competing visions” of what should be done. Wynne Wright noted how often times those within land-grant institutions “persist in turning social problems into technical fixes, perhaps because our unwavering defense of science is the primary tool in our epistemological tool kit.” Elsewhere, Wright continued her critique of the land-grant university: “Under the cloak of ‘scientific objectivity,’ land grant research and Extension programming continue to embrace the power of science to solve what are essentially social problems, either unaware of, or politically insensitive to, the socially-situated nature of knowledge construction or the problems and risks that emerge from innovation.” The university struggled to function

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<sup>29</sup> Jan Hartough, Wynne Wright, and Frank A. Fear, "Public Deliberation on Contested Issues in Agriculture and Natural Resources: Building Capacity in an American Land Grant University (Learning from Year One July 2007-June 2008)," (East Lansing, MI: Michigan State University; Charles F. Kettering Foundation, 2008); Jan Hartough et al., "Public Deliberation on Contested Issues in Agriculture and Natural Resources: Building Capacity in an American Land Grant University: Learning from Year Two: August 2008 - July 2009 " (East Lansing, MI: Michigan State University, 2009); E. Brown et al., "Public Deliberation on Contested Issues in Agriculture and Natural Resources: Building Capacity in an American Land Grant University: Learning from Year Three: August 2009 - July 2010," (East Lansing, MI: Michigan State University, 2010). I have written elsewhere about this work. See Timothy J. Shaffer, "Environmental Leadership and Deliberative Democracy," in *Environmental Leadership: A Reference Handbook*, ed. Deborah R. Gallagher (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2012).



as something other than an institution with expertise.<sup>30</sup> What Wright identified was not just competing visions with respect to epistemologies, but rather competing identities about what the university and Extension were and what they did based on particular identities. One of the communities where Wright's observation played out was a lakeside city of 10,000 residents. This was the community I planned to study.

The MSU team had been called in to help Green Port with what many agreed was an urban deer problem that could no longer be dismissed.<sup>31</sup> Complaints from homeowners of property damage caused by deer eating plants and shrubbery increased. Deer roamed streets and caused an increased number of vehicular accidents. A systematic, or "multitier plan" was needed because "one step won't solve anything," the local paper quoted a resident as saying.

After a few meetings between local government officials and the MSU team, they decided jointly to have opportunities for citizens to voice their concerns or grievances about the impact deer were having on their lives and to learn more about deer in urban settings. Public forums, typically two hours long, served as a sort of "deer management 101," Hartough recalled. Building on these three forums and the realization that something more needed to happen, city administrators invited citizens to form a taskforce reflective of the divided population and to make recommendations to the city government about how best to address this increasingly contentious issue.

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<sup>30</sup> Wynne Wright, "Deer, Dissension, and Dialogue: A University-Community Collaboration in Public Deliberation," *Journal of Higher Education Outreach and Engagement* 13, no. 3 (2009): 22; ———, "Wicked Bedfellows: Can Science and Democracy Coexist in the Land Grant?," 60-61.

<sup>31</sup> "Green Port" is a pseudonym used by others who have been engaged in research with this community. For the sake of retaining as much anonymity as possible, I employ this pseudonym as well. For more on research on this topic, see ———, "Deer, Dissension, and Dialogue: A University-Community Collaboration in Public Deliberation."; ———, "Wicked Bedfellows: Can Science and Democracy Coexist in the Land Grant?."

But tensions among citizens were not the only ones to be found in Green Port. In addition to the team from MSU, there were other MSU Extension professionals who lived and worked in the community. It was actually the local Extension director, Aaron King<sup>32</sup>, who unknowingly shifted my dissertation away from a focused study on the engagement work in Green Port.

Sitting in his office in the county government complex on a cool morning in March of 2010, King spoke in a candid way about how MSU had played a role in Green Port's deer management work. He told me about his background in agriculture and how he had moved up the ranks in Extension to his role as county director. Passionate about Extension's work, he felt he and his coworkers were doing a good job meeting the needs of the community. They were part of an important community institution, particularly because they brought an unbiased approach to issues. Regardless of the issue, people could trust Extension because of this unaffiliated and scientifically based approach.

But for him, organizing a taskforce was not appropriate for MSU or Extension. He was opposed to the idea that Extension would facilitate such a deliberative process because he felt Extension needed to "stay completely objective to either side" of the issue and needed to be able to answer questions "based on sound scientific evidence." In the case of deer in Green Port, he would have preferred for wildlife biologists to take the lead rather than sociologists interested in deliberative democracy. If anyone was going to facilitate this work, it should be someone from another organization—not Extension or the university.

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<sup>32</sup> A pseudonym.

King lamented how “geared towards community action” Frank Fear was instead of “the other side of things.” For him, this *other side* was his conception that Extension needed to pull away from being involved in these types of local issues in a way that was so explicitly political. This was the case even though Fear and others were focused on using deliberative dialogue to help citizens understand and address contentious public issues. To him, that was not Extension’s role. Instead, Extension should provide services and expertise when it came to dealing with such natural resources issues. He did not have a problem with professionals from other organizations facilitating discussion about such an issue. It just was not the place for Extension since it needed to maintain its commitment to research-based knowledge when it came to such issues. For King, there was a very real and important tension between county Extension agents in his community and those who pushed for greater community action or “engagement,” as they referred to it. He stressed this point in his interview with me:

“Its kind of very disturbing because most of our clientele are from the standpoint that they need information and education. They look at us as a resource—you know, an objective, unbiased resource. And that’s what they need. Because in too many cases, they’re being pounded and hounded on by individuals that are trying to sell something. So they need to come to us and be able to ascertain exactly what should it be, or for, at least, us to be able to provide them the ability to go to those individuals if we don’t have it in house...basing that off of our objective position. And that has nothing to do with community action.”

While there is much that could be explored in this statement—his use of the terms “clientele,” “objective,” and “unbiased” are worthy of further consideration—it was his next comment that raised questions about the history of Extension which invites us

to explore a chapter of America's forgotten history. He spoke of how it was only in recent years that Extension shifted its role in the community:

“Community action has been kind of one of the newer Extension components—this facilitation—compared to, I guess, where we came from historically. So that's really been derived in the last 10, 15, 20 years. And in some cases, in some states, we've seen that bed put to rest per se. In some states, they went back and said, ‘We can't do this. We have to go back to our very narrow focus.’ [Take] South Dakota State, for instance. They started becoming too much to too many people. And under restricted financing, you have to begin to prioritize and begin to take a look—who else is out there doing what other type of services in some other fashion that could be considered unbiased? And they chose to go back to the basics of Extension and said, ‘We're cutting out all this other stuff.’ So if they do facilitation, it's specifically under certain circumstances within those areas that they work under, not just, ‘Let's go and do everything and anything.’”

He was accurate in his assessment of the challenges Extension faced in recent years.

Budget cuts, increased accountability, and the growth of anti-government sentiments all impacted Extension's bottom line and capabilities. In response, Extension provided defenses for relevance, yet it has remained burdened by what MSU's own Extension director has called an “institutional inertia that resists change.”<sup>33</sup> But what was the change *to*, and equally important, what was this change *from*?

King's assessment of Extension's recent and historical practices stayed with me long after leaving his office in the government complex. In addition to King's perspective, I was aware of another understanding of Extension's past. Primarily through the scholarship of Scott J. Peters, I knew King's comments were partial and incomplete, only telling one aspect of Extension's more complex and nuanced history.

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<sup>33</sup> Thomas G. Coon, "Expertise, the Cooperative Extension Service, and Engaged Scholarship," in *Handbook of Engaged Scholarship: Contemporary Landscapes, Future Directions*, ed. Hiram E. Fitzgerald, C. Burack, and Sarena D. Seifer (East Lansing, MI: Michigan State University Press, 2010), 72.

What I knew was that Extension was a organization comprised of both educators and administrators who advocated for research-based knowledge as well as those who were committed to working with men and women to help improve their lives by teaching them how to lead more democratic lives. There had always been a tension between a technocratic mindset and an approach that was more democratic, relational, and engaged.<sup>34</sup> But Extension is more than simply a tension between these two approaches. It has a more complex and complicated identity as a delivery system for science-based research, an extensive adult education organization, and a community development agency.<sup>35</sup> What was playing out in Michigan was a representation of something that had always existed between people who felt differently about what Extension was and what it should do.

During the period when Wilson and other USDA administrators were championing democratic discussion among citizens, Gladys L. Baker published her important study on Extension's county agent. She noted the resistance and hesitation many agents had about the discussion efforts that were receiving so much attention from USDA administrators. She wrote about tension between the vision of USDA administrators and the expectations of Extension agents this way:

“County agents who were responsible for setting up the discussion groups in communities and counties were not always enthusiastic about this additional project advocated by the Department of Agriculture at a time when they were already burdened with numerous federal

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<sup>34</sup> A striking example of this tension can be found in the earliest years of Extension work (even before the Cooperative Extension Service came into existence in 1914 through the Smith-Lever Act) between two leading figures in rural America: Seaman A. Knapp and Liberty Hyde Bailey. These two monumental figures and their corresponding approaches to extension work are developed more fully below. See footnote 340.

<sup>35</sup> See Scott J. Peters, "Storying and Restorying the Land-Grant System," in *The Land-Grant Colleges and the Reshaping of American Higher Education*, ed. Roger L. Geiger and Nathan M. Sorber (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 2013).

programs. The training and experience of the agents did not fit them with the necessary tolerance and objectivity for this task; for they were accustomed to parceling out a continuous supply of ‘right answers’ to immediately pressing farm problems and consequently often found it difficult to see the practical value of philosophical discussion groups.”<sup>36</sup>

While there was obviously energy from administrators about efforts for cultivating a democracy in which farmers engaged one another about important political, cultural, and philosophical questions, the reaction by those organizing these efforts were more nuanced as demonstrated in this quote from Baker’s extensive study. Extension was and is complex, being less a monolithic organization and more a diverse group of community-based educators.

Upon returning from my trip to Green Port, I met with Scott J. Peters to discuss how the trip went and what I was thinking about my research. It was during that follow-up conversation about my dissertation in his office at Cornell University that we pulled an old, heavy volume off the shelf. I do not recall precisely why it was the book we reached for because it was but one of the many historical books about Extension, land-grant universities, or the USDA on the shelves within reach. But I do remember there was something intriguing about the title: *Farmers in a Changing World*.

The USDA published an annual yearbook. Editions of the yearbook published from 1936 to 1939 had titles such as “Better Plants and Animals,” “Improvement of Flowers by Breeding,” “Soils and Men,” and “Food and Life.” But 1940 was different. It was a tome of more than 1200 pages comprised of 55 articles with 72 authors. Within it, one reviewer acknowledged, was a “mass of important factual data bearing

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<sup>36</sup> Gladys L. Baker, *The County Agent* (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 1939), 85.

on American agriculture, present factors affecting it and programs now in operation dealing with its problems.”<sup>37</sup> Another reviewer noted the increase and improvement of knowledge concerning agriculture: “We not only know more about agriculture as a whole that we ever have before but we have gained specific and detailed information regarding its many sectors.” Viewing agriculture as an industry *and* a way of life offered a “perspective regarding its contemporary problems that we have never had before and has given us an appreciation and understanding of the many forces—technical, political, economic, social, and psychological—which have influenced its development and shaped its destiny.”<sup>38</sup> It was a chapter by M. L. Wilson in this volume that embodied the view that agricultural issues were far more complex than might be assumed if only understood through an economic lens. Evocatively, he emphasized the social and cultural aspects of American agriculture and the need to recognize and understand these in addition to the economic dimensions that so often dominated discourses about agriculture.<sup>39</sup>

While flipping through the pages of the yearbook with excitement about Wilson’s chapter, I came across what would solidify my dissertation’s shift away from Green Port to an earlier, and to me unknown, chapter in Extension’s history. Carl F. Taeusch, head of PSD within the USDA’s Agricultural Adjustment Administration (AAA) and then later Bureau of Agricultural Economics (BAE), wrote an essay entitled, “Schools of Philosophy for Farmers.” While the yearbook included an entire

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<sup>37</sup> Margaret G. Reid, "Farmers in a Changing World: The 1940 Yearbook of Agriculture. I," *Journal of Farm Economics* 23, no. 2 (1941): 447, 446.

<sup>38</sup> D. O. Hammerberg, "Farmers in a Changing World: The 1940 Yearbook of Agriculture. II," *Journal of Farm Economics* 23, no. 2 (1941): 451.

<sup>39</sup> M. L. Wilson, "Beyond Economics," in *Farmers in a Changing World*, ed. Gove Hambidge (Washington, DC: United States Government Printing Office, 1940).

section on “Democracy and Agricultural Policy,” Taeusch’s contribution pushed this concept beyond surveys of citizens. Instead, he offered a more “truly democratic” method for “running our affairs.” He provided an account of Extension agents working with communities by helping citizens gather together to learn about and engage topics of importance through deliberation with others.<sup>40</sup> In his review of the yearbook, L. J. Norton mentioned Taeusch and used his chapter as a way to make sense of agricultural issues: “One cannot read this collection of essays without getting a feeling that some of the authors believe that some of our present agricultural policies are not as good as they should be. How can this situation be corrected? ... Perhaps Doctor Taeusch has the solution...Get people to talk it over.” Norton ironically wrote his review of the yearbook while participating in one such effort with a “group of Iowa men and women” talking over agricultural issues.<sup>41</sup>

Having been intrigued by the writing of Wilson and Taeusch in *Farmers in a Changing World*, I wanted to know more about the USDA and Extension work of the 1930s and 1940s that shaped such writing because it told what appeared to be an otherwise forgotten chapter in the story of Extension. More broadly, these two chapters pointed out that people in government agencies and universities thought of their roles and their organizations as important elements in a larger conversation about democracy. But I had a lingering thought: what do I do with the comment King made in his office that it was only in the last decade or two that Extension had worked with communities in a deliberative and facilitative role and that Extension needed to *return*

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<sup>40</sup> Carl F. Taeusch, "Schools of Philosophy for Farmers," in *Farmers in a Changing World*, ed. Gove Hambidge (Washington, DC: United States Government Printing Office, 1940), 1111.

<sup>41</sup> L. J. Norton, "Farmers in a Changing World: The 1940 Yearbook of Agriculture. III," *Journal of Farm Economics* 23, no. 2 (1941): 454.



to its very narrow focus on offering expert knowledge to citizens and communities in need? That did not completely fit with what I had just read, acknowledging that there were multiple ways to improve the lives of rural men and women.<sup>42</sup>

King was not the only person who held such a view. One of the “main problems with the prevailing view of the historical nature and significance of the land-grant mission,” Peters writes, is that the history of the institution’s mission has been narrowly understood, raising questions not only about the historical accuracy of how we speak about and understand the land-grant system, but also about the ways in which these universities fulfill their public purpose of being the “people’s universities” today.<sup>43</sup> Without turning King into a straw man, he raised the stakes in looking at the history of land-grant universities and Extension because of the assumption that we have deviated from the main purpose and mission of these educational institutions only recently. However, if we go back and look at our past, will we find what he referred to as that very narrow focus?

The book on the shelf in Peters’ office revealed a rich story within the history of Extension about a previous attempt, similar in some ways to the efforts of Jan Hartough, Wynne Wright, and Frank Fear that revealed a history of difference and disagreement about the role of the USDA, land-grant university, and Extension. With that brief introduction from the 1940 yearbook, I made a decision to focus on this

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<sup>42</sup> Throughout Extension’s history, there have always been tensions between means and ends when it came to improving the lives of citizens and communities. King’s view that discussion, deliberation, and facilitation were deviations from Extension’s more traditional approaches does not necessary mean that his belief that the expert role of providing unbiased, scientifically-based research could help communities address public problems.

<sup>43</sup> Scott J. Peters, “Reconstructing a Democratic Tradition of Public Scholarship in the Land-Grant System,” in *Agent of Democracy: Higher Education and the Hex Journey*, ed. David W. Brown and Deborah Witte (Dayton, OH: Kettering Foundation Press, 2008), 123.

story that very few people know much about. I found a topic that intrigued me. I wanted to know more about the USDA administrators who dealt with very challenging and difficult choices regarding what they could and should do as government employees in response to issues such as a failing economy and soil that was literally blowing away.<sup>44</sup>

The ideas and philosophies that shaped the PSD developed into two related initiatives. The first, foundational element of this initiative became known as farmer discussion groups. These were adult education opportunities organized and facilitated by local Cooperative Extension agents from land-grant colleges with rural men and women. As will be outlined in later chapters, the USDA aimed to help foster informed discussion about a wide variety of topics with support from the Department through the publication of discussion materials.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Few have written about this work: David Lachman, "Democratic Ideology and Agricultural Policy "Program Study and Discussion" in the U.S. Department of Agriculture, 1934-1946" (Master's Thesis, University of Wisconsin - Madison, 1991); Jess Gilbert, "Low Modernism and the Agrarian New Deal," in *Fighting for the Farm: Rural America Transformed*, ed. Jane Adams (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003); ———, "Inviting Criticism: The New Deal's Farmer Discussion Groups and Schools of Philosophy for Extension Workers," (Paper presented at the Agricultural History Society and the Rural Sociological Society 2009); Andrew Jewett, "The Social Sciences, Philosophy, and the Cultural Turn in the 1930s USDA," *Journal of the History of the Behavioral Sciences* 49, no. 4 (2013); Harry Carson McDean, "M. L. Wilson and Agricultural Reform in Twentieth Century America" (PhD Dissertation, University of California, Los Angeles, 1969). For example, a dissertation focusing on adult education in the 1930s failed to mention the discussion work of the USDA and Extension system. See Ronald J. Hilton, "The Short Happy Life of a Learning Society: Adult Education in America, 1930-39" (Doctoral Dissertation, PhD Dissertation, Syracuse University, 1981).

<sup>45</sup> In a speech before the American Country Life Association's annual conference in 1939, Wilson spoke about the need to think about education as something that went beyond formal education. He put it this way: "Education is a fundamental and essential process within the individual as well as a necessary social function. It begins as soon as a child is born, and ends when life ceases.... Education...is inherently and inevitably a continuing process that has no end." Wilson owed his conception of continuing education to Kenyon L. Butterfield, one of the founders of the American Country Life Association and a critical leader in both agrarian education and the development of extension at land-grant institutions. See M. L. Wilson, "What Are The Objectives of Continuing Education?," in *What's Ahead for Rural America: Proceedings of the Twenty-Second American Country Life Conference, State College, Pennsylvania, August 30-September 2, 1939*, ed. Benson Y. Landis (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press for the American Country Life Association, 1940), 47.

Schools of Philosophy were seen as both a complement to and as a further development of discussion groups. Initially focused on continuing education and professional development for Extension agents, Schools expanded to be inclusive of others such as librarians and farm organization leaders. Unlike discussion groups that were facilitated by local Extension agents in small groups often between 10 and 15 people, USDA staff members organized Schools. This was done in partnership with local, state, and university officials. Schools brought together large numbers of Extension professionals (typically in the hundreds) for multiple days to listen to lectures from leading scholars from diverse disciplines and then to participate in small group discussions in response to the topics and questions raised in those lectures. The idea behind Schools was to expand how “agricultural” issues were understood so that agents might engage citizens to address issues in ways that acknowledged the complexity and nuance of public problems.

What makes this story about discussion groups and Schools noteworthy was how a federal agency like the USDA would choose to commit time and resources to a program that was based on the idea that citizens, and democracy more broadly, would benefit from organized group discussion and continuing education. This was in addition to the deployment of specialists into the field and the making of policy decisions in Washington, DC. Even more intriguing is that land-grant universities, known primarily as research institutions, were essential to this citizen-centered work. Government administrators and community educators engaged in this education effort for multiple reasons and this dissertation is an attempt to better understand why.

### *Central Question*

This dissertation is based on a central question: how did government administrators function as civic professionals committed to helping people become informed and engaged citizens? Wilson, Wallace, Taeusch, and others such as Extension agent William F. Johnston, who will be described in later chapters, connected their identities with an understanding of how “ordinary” citizens and those in professional positions name, frame, and pursue public problems.<sup>46</sup> An emphasis on the role of the professional in relationship with citizens needing to be educated about political, cultural, and economic issues linked to a public philosophy that expressed a commitment to and pursuit of particular values. These values were focused on democratic participation through education and discussion, something distinct from problem solving and the idea of simply getting things done, regardless of how that is to be accomplished.

### *Through a Narrative Lens*

In *Actual Minds, Possible Worlds*, psychologist Jerome S. Bruner argues that there are two modes of thought, two ways of knowing the world: one mode is paradigmatic, logico-scientific, or analytic and the second mode is narrative. Commenting on Bruner’s argument about how we see the world, Marshall Ganz notes, “Cognitively mapping the world, we can discern patterns, test relationships, and hypothesize empirical claims—the domain of analysis. But we can also map the world affectively,

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<sup>46</sup> The Kettering Foundation has helped to bring attention to the importance of citizens naming and framing issues in language that makes sense to them and comes from their experiences. This relates directly to the actions citizens take. As a recent report expresses: “...while naming and framing are critical, they aren’t ends in themselves. They are just two elements in the larger politics of public decision making and action.” *Naming and Framing Difficult Issues to Make Sound Decisions: A Kettering Foundation Report*, (Dayton, OH: Kettering Foundation, 2011), 3.

coding experience, objects, and symbols as good for us or bad for us, fearful or safe, hopeful or depressing, and so on.” Using the analytic mode we can answer “how” questions, but we need narrative to help us answer “why.” How we know and engage the world, Kevin M. Bradt, S.J. argues, determines “not only what we know but also what we can know.”<sup>47</sup>

Given the question stated above about government administrators functioning as civic professionals committed to helping people become informed and engaged citizens, I have constructed a story. I have taken this approach because of how different *this* story is from many of the assumptions people can make about things like the USDA and Extension, large government institutions. This is in addition to the meta- (or grand) narratives that shape the interpretation and writing of history about these and other institutions.<sup>48</sup>

This dissertation relies on multiple historical sources: government and university archives, books, articles, pamphlets, letters, memos, interviews, and speeches. A narrative approach brings these elements together, telling a story about the PSD and the administrators who created the possibility for a bold and unique approach to adult education through a federal agency. Rather than simply a chronicling of events, these sources inform and animate this narrative.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> Jerome S. Bruner, *Actual Minds, Possible Worlds* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1986), 12-13; Marshall Ganz, "Leading Change: Leadership, Organization and Social Movements," in *Handbook of Leadership Theory and Practice*, ed. Nitin Nohria and Rakesh Khurana (Danvers: Harvard Business School Press, 2010), 516; Kevin M. Bradt, *Story as a Way of Knowing* (Kansas City, MO: Sheed & Ward, 1997), 3.

<sup>48</sup> See Peters, "Storying and Restorying the Land-Grant System."; Joyce A. Appleby, Lynn Hunt, and Margaret Jacob, *Telling the Truth About History* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1994), 232.

<sup>49</sup> Cronon, "A Place for Stories: Nature, History, and Narrative," 1350, 1351.

I fully disclose that there are multiple ways to tell and interpret this story. As William Cronon has pointed out, even when we are working with the same resources and material we are not merely drawing different conclusions. With his example of two historians writing about the Dust Bowl, Cronon notes how “both narrate the same broad series of events with an essentially similar cast of characters, [though] they tell two entirely different *stories*.” This story—about discussion groups, Schools of Philosophy, and the ideas and people that created them—can be storied in various ways. As Richard Kearney contends, each retelling of history is part of a “continuing conflict of interpretations” and fills a “battlefield of competing meanings.”<sup>50</sup>

In short, I approach the construction of this dissertation by asking these questions: What is the story? What happened? What is its significance? I attend specifically to themes and issues related to civic professionalism, democratic theory, and public philosophy, recognizing that stories are saturated with theory.<sup>51</sup>

In the early stages of research for this dissertation, colleagues and I identified at least five different ways to tell and interpret this story:

1. As a strange story about an episode of “mission-drift” in Extension when USDA administrators asked it to do something that isn’t consistent with Extension’s agriculture-centered, science-based-information-provision and technical problem-solving mission.
2. As a tragic story about how powerful special interests can and do squash efforts to strengthen citizen-centered and deliberative approaches to democratic politics.
3. As an instructive failure story that shows why top-down efforts by academic and government experts to “educate” people to be deliberative citizens doesn’t and can’t work.

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<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 1348; Richard Kearney, *On Stories*, Thinking in Action (New York: Routledge, 2002), 83.

<sup>51</sup> Madeleine R. Grumet, “Restitution and Reconstruction of Educational Experience: An Autobiographical Method for Curriculum Theory,” in *Rethinking Curriculum Studies: A Radical Approach*, ed. M. Lawn and L. Barton (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1981), 124.

4. As a sinister story of deceptive social engineering led by academics and government bureaucrats who used a deceptive language of “democracy” and “discussion” to conceal their real agenda of advancing science and the economic interests of the state.
5. As a prophetic story about an important effort to make democracy work as it should that offers useful lessons about the political roles and work of government and higher education professionals.<sup>52</sup>

At different points in the dissertation, there are episodes and instances that demonstrate how any one of these ways to tell this story could be justified. Looking back to Green Port highlights this. For Aaron King, discussion groups in the 1930s would be an example of Extension deviating from its core purpose and mission of doing research-based technical problem solving. Yet I see this story as something more.

I have made the intentional choice to construct this narrative in a way that highlights the ideas and work of administrators and educators as civic professionals. I have done this so that we might learn from these individuals who tried to create a culture in which men and women engaged one another in informed discussion. As theologian Terrence W. Tilley has written, “We value stories which reveal something that we didn’t know or see before.”<sup>53</sup> Narratives are most powerful when they challenge our complacency and teach us something new.

Constructing this narrative as a prophetic story, I attempt to tell a story that offers an alternative to the “consciousness and perception of the dominant culture around us.” In this case, I construct a narrative that emphasizes the commitments government administrators and university educators had to cultivating a deliberative

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<sup>52</sup> Scott J. Peters, Theodore R. Alter, and Timothy J. Shaffer, "Year Two Research Report: Cooperative Extension's Roles in Cultivating and Sustaining Democratic Publics," (Dayton, OH: Kettering Foundation, 2011), 13.

<sup>53</sup> Terrence W. Tilley, *Story Theology* (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1985), 187.

and democratic culture both within institutions and within rural communities that looked to discussion as a way to better understand complex issues. To tell this prophetic story, I draw on the Jude-Christian tradition of prophetic writing in the sense that it is, in the words of Walter Brueggemann, “always social, historical, this-worldly, political, economic.” Prophetic voices challenge dominant ones and offer a reminder that no culture is about just one story or one version of it.<sup>54</sup> Finally, I construct this as a prophetic story because there is evidence for this type of story and interpretation. The characters and plot in the following chapters show a commitment to a democratic ideal and the challenges to championing that ideal in real-world terms.

This dissertation constructs a historical narrative that offers the reader an opportunity to consider the meaning and value of efforts by USDA administrators to put into practice educational programs based on a set of values about what a government agency could and should do to cultivate democratic life.<sup>55</sup> The creation of a narrative is intentional because, as Scott J. Peters and Nancy Franz argue, “we can’t *live* without them. One of the main ways we make meaning of our lives and experiences, our society and its institutions and the broader natural world we inhabit is by telling and interpreting stories about them.”<sup>56</sup> Narratives end up being one of our

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<sup>54</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1978), 13; ———, *Hope within History* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1987), 75; Jerome S. Bruner, *Making Stories: Law, Literature, Life* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002), 57.

<sup>55</sup> I borrow this language of “cultivating” from C. Wright Mills. In *The Sociological Imagination*, Mills wrote about the role of social science and the social scientist, but we can easily broaden his comments to refer to all of higher education’s educational and political role in democracy as being about “help[ing] cultivate and sustain publics and individuals that are able to develop, to live with, and to act upon adequate definitions of personal and social realities.” C. Wright Mills, *The Sociological Imagination* (New York: Oxford University Press, [1959] 2000), 192.

<sup>56</sup> Scott J. Peters and Nancy Franz, “Stories and Storytelling in Extension Work,” *Journal of Extension* 50, no. 4 (2012). Similarly, Richard Kearney suggests that narrative is a “world-making as well as world-disclosing process.” Kearney, *On Stories*, 145.



“best and most compelling” tools for searching out meaning in what William Cronon calls our “conflicted and contradictory world.”<sup>57</sup> Thomas King, in *The Truth About Stories: A Native Narrative*, raised this point: “Did you ever wonder how it is we imagine the world in the way we do, how it is we imagine ourselves, if not through stories.”<sup>58</sup> To make sense of our world, we must understand what has shaped it and what continues to do so. Similarly, Alasdair MacIntyre invites us to acknowledge our time and place, insightfully noting how we need to situate ourselves:

“I can only answer the question ‘What am I to do?’ if I can answer the prior question ‘Of what story or stories do I find myself a part?’ We enter human society, that is, with one or more imputed characters—roles into which we have been drafted—and we have to learn what they are in order to be able to understand how others respond to us and how our responses to them are apt to be construed.... Hence there is no way to give us an understanding of any society, including our own, except through the stock of stories which constitute [it].”<sup>59</sup>

MacIntyre reminds us that we are part of what is already in existence and are shaped by what has come before. This is true for M. L. Wilson, for example. We, too, must situate ourselves within the narratives that shape our society and not pretend we are somehow unencumbered by earlier ideas and actions—being mindful of the nuanced dimensions that shape our past whether we agree with them or not.<sup>60</sup>

In Wilson’s remarks to the government and university administrators convened in 1935 exploring the possibility of a discussion project, he spoke about the limitations of both the USDA and universities. “I believe that there are some definite limits to the

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<sup>57</sup> Cronon, “A Place for Stories: Nature, History, and Narrative,” 1374.

<sup>58</sup> Thomas King, *The Truth About Stories: A Native Narrative* (Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis Press, 2003), 95.

<sup>59</sup> Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, 2nd ed. (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), 216.

<sup>60</sup> Bruner, *Actual Minds, Possible Worlds*, 131.

functions of the Department of Agriculture and the state colleges,” he noted, “but we certainly should not be unresponsive to the larger needs.”<sup>61</sup> In making this comment, Wilson was not advocating for these institutions to eschew their missions or responsibilities. Instead, he was encouraging them to craft new narratives about who they were and about the institutions of which they were a part. In the context of deeply troubling situations such as economic collapse and environmental deterioration, Wilson believed that what was needed were opportunities for citizens to deliberate and engage in choice work with neighbors and colleagues. Land-grant colleges, Extension, and the USDA could help make that happen. He was asking Extension agents to help shape a new narrative, a “story of now” to use Marshall Ganz’s phrase, of being deliberative in the face of daunting challenges.<sup>62</sup>

Wilson encouraged administrators and educators to view themselves not simply as government officials or as Extension agents, but as civic professionals—an identity that had implications for how they would understand and work through what historian Thomas Bender has referred to as the “dilemma of the relation of expertise and democracy.”<sup>63</sup> Encouraging both institutions and individuals to consider new narratives about what they should do in response to societal needs, Wilson’s view of the professional’s identity was wrapped up in a sense of understanding the history of

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<sup>61</sup> United States Department of Agriculture, *Preliminary Report of the Forum and Discussion Group Project*, 5.

<sup>62</sup> Ganz, “Leading Change: Leadership, Organization and Social Movements,” 526. On deliberation and choice work, see David Mathews and N. McAfee, *Making Choices Together: The Power of Public Deliberation* (Dayton, OH: Charles F. Kettering Foundation, 2003).

<sup>63</sup> Wilson did not use the term “civic professional,” but his writing, speeches, and oral histories support the concept as stated elsewhere in this dissertation. On the “dilemma,” see Thomas Bender, *Intellect and Public Life: Essays on the Social History of Academic Intellectuals in the United States* (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993), 128.

Extension education as well as acknowledging the departure that discussion work was from the more familiar technical dimensions of Extension's work in communities.

In a dissertation exploring ideas and people from the 1930s and 1940s, constructing a narrative is essential if I am to attempt to capture the essence and meaning of the PSD's deliberative and educational work led by civic professionals. But as novelist Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie has powerfully expressed in her now popular TED Talk, there is danger in the single story about people or a place. If we flatten or simplify a narrative, we miss out on the opportunity to reconsider what we know and reinforce the status quo. As Ngozi Adichie said in her talk:

“Stories matter. Many stories matter. Stories have been used to dispossess and to malign, but stories can also be used to empower and to humanize.... Show a people as one thing—as only one thing—over and over again, and that is what they will become.”<sup>64</sup>

In a similar way, Harley F. Etienne reminds us that we can fall into a habit of speaking about institutions in a similar way. He writes this about research universities:

“The socially accepted narrative about universities is that they are wealthy, geographically bound islands of privilege and exclusivity with significant resources. In this narrative, colleges and universities are largely benign, and their impacts on society are generally beneficent and magnanimous, taking the form of education for society or breakthroughs in research; thus, universities are responsible for proving their own usefulness to society.”<sup>65</sup>

But as this dissertation will demonstrate, the role of the university, particularly the land-grant university, is not simply to exist apart from the world; instead, these institutions, have significant and diverse roles in the lives of individuals and of

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<sup>64</sup> Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, "The Danger of a Single Story."

<sup>65</sup> Harley F. Etienne, *Pushing Back the Gates: Neighborhood Perspectives on University-Driven Revitalization in West Philadelphia* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2012), 1-2.

communities. The danger of the single story is that it simplifies otherwise complex individuals and institutions to the point that is all they are and can be.<sup>66</sup>

Listening to and learning from the voices of administrators, educators, and participants involved with this effort are both foundational to this dissertation. To approach this work with narratives, I draw strongly from the scholarship of John Forester and Scott J. Peters because they have both studied and used narratives to provide insight into *how* professionals approach and view their work.<sup>67</sup> They have utilized oral histories and, more specifically, practitioner profiles conducted with planners, administrators, and educators. In this dissertation, I draw on historical narratives—interviews, reports, letters, essays, articles, and so on—to gain insight into how professionals articulated and approached their work within institutions such as the USDA, land-grant universities, and Cooperative Extension Service.<sup>68</sup>

But while there are benefits gained from working with narratives, one of the challenges is the acknowledgement that one does not learn what someone has “actually” done in order to make firm and settled knowledge claims. Instead of

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<sup>66</sup> Yet another example of the power of a single story is F. S. Michaels, *Monoculture: How One Story Is Changing Everything* (Kaloops, BC: Red Clover, 2011).

<sup>67</sup> See John Forester, *The Deliberative Practitioner: Encouraging Participatory Planning Processes* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1999); ———, *Dealing with Differences: Dramas of Mediating Public Disputes* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009); ———, *Planning in the Face of Conflict: The Surprising Possibilities of Facilitative Leadership* (Chicago: American Planning Association, 2013); Scott J. Peters and Margo Hittleman, “We Grow People: Profiles of Extension Educators.” (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University, 2003); Scott J. Peters et al., eds., *Engaging Campus and Community: The Practice of Public Scholarship in the State and Land-Grant University System* (Dayton, OH: Kettering Foundation Press, 2005); Scott J. Peters, *Catalyzing Change: Profiles of Cornell Cooperative Extension Educators from Greene, Tompkins, and Erie Counties, New York* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University, 2006); ———, *Democracy and Higher Education*; Peters and Franz, “Stories and Storytelling in Extension Work.”; Peters, “Storying and Restorying the Land-Grant System.”

<sup>68</sup> My approach to this dissertation is to offer a broad overview of the story of the PSD in the USDA and to emphasize the work of key administrators and educators by leaning heavily on their voices to speak, for themselves, about the democratic and educational efforts they shaped during the 1930s and 1940s. For that reason, there are select passages of greater length than is often found in such historical scholarship. But to tell this story without such extensive quotations would be a disservice to the insight and wisdom from these individuals who can help us make sense of the challenges we face today.

discovering the Truth, narratives get at “small-*t* truths.” And while they do not provide easy “how to” guides or instructions, narratives can provide “stories that can help us discover and make meaning” through interpretation. Finally, working with narratives takes time and effort. Making sense of and interpreting narratives requires commitment to reading and re-reading material and being open to the multiple interpretations possible within even a single text.<sup>69</sup>

With those cautions stated, I situate this dissertation as a study that is concerned more with trustworthiness rather than validity.<sup>70</sup> Validation is not something to be dismissed, but rather rethought. The use of narratives shifts validation from adherence to certain protocol to the idea that others make sense of the truth and relevance of scholarship.<sup>71</sup> Elliot Mishler contends that validity occurs when a study comes to be viewed as “sufficiently trustworthy for other investigators to rely upon [it] in their own work.”<sup>72</sup> In this sense, judgments about validity are less about simple acceptance or nonacceptance and more about the likelihood and probability that a claim is truthful.<sup>73</sup> This dissertation, if it is to be trusted, must acknowledge the complexity of the individuals, institutions, and ideas that comprise this narrative. I will now briefly provide an overview of the chapters of this dissertation.

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<sup>69</sup> Peters, *Democracy and Higher Education*, 67.

<sup>70</sup> D. Jean Clandinin and F. Michael Connelly, *Narrative Inquiry: Experience and Story in Qualitative Research* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2000), 179-181.

<sup>71</sup> Donald E. Polkinghorne, “Validity Issues in Narrative Research,” *Qualitative Inquiry* 13, no. 4 (2007): 474; Catherine Kohler Riessman, *Narrative Methods for the Human Sciences* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2008), 196.

<sup>72</sup> Elliot G. Mishler, “Validation in Inquiry-Guided Research: The Role of Exemplars in Narrative Studies,” *Harvard Educational Review* 60, no. 4 (1990): 429.

<sup>73</sup> Martyn Hammersley, *What's Wrong with Ethnography?: Methodological Explorations* (New York: Routledge, 1992); Kathleen Wells, *Narrative Inquiry*, Pocket Guides to Social Work Research Methods (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 113-124.

### *Overview of Chapters*

To gain a better understanding of the world in which USDA administrators undertook their democratic experiment, Chapter 2 sets the scene and provides a background to what would take place during the New Deal when discussion became a more prominent vehicle for addressing the broadly defined “farm problem.” It looks at the first days and months of Franklin D. Roosevelt’s administration, focusing attention on the Department of Agriculture and its attempt to bring farmers—and the entire nation—back from the brink of desperation because the severity of the Great Depression. Focusing on the various actors who shaped the landmark Agricultural Adjustment Act, the philosophy behind it, and the impact it had on citizens, institutions, and government, this chapter serves as an essential introduction to the educational initiatives of the USDA that built on the relationships established by the Agricultural Adjustment Administration with the Cooperative Extension system while also functioning in a way that differed dramatically from the broader New Deal. This chapter also offers an introduction to some of the most important individuals and institutions in this narrative: these include Henry A. Wallace and M. L. Wilson and the influence their lives and experiences had on them before they came to lead the USDA during the New Deal in addition to a brief introduction to the formative period for the Cooperative Extension Service and American Farm Bureau Federation.

Chapter 3 focuses on the early work of the USDA in the area of group discussion and the belief that adult education held great promise for citizens to learn from one another about the local, regional, national, and international challenges they faced. There was substantive planning before discussion groups emerged in rural

communities across the country. This chapter explores some of the early questions, disagreements, and ideas about what the potential was for group discussion. Included are details about what happened, beginning with the first thoughts of farmer discussion groups in 1934 through the implementation phase in 1935 with ten states and then a later nationwide rollout. To help bring this early period to life, this chapter includes a section looking at on-the-ground work in rural eastern North Carolina.

Chapter 4 tells the story about the PSD and its farmer discussion groups and Schools of Philosophy after the initial trial phase of the effort. It was during this period that farmer discussion groups continued to increase and the USDA supported them by producing materials for use by these citizens. To better understand what occurred in communities, we focus attention on Michigan and Michigan State College's Extension work with various groups and organizations that used discussion methods. Additionally, the story in Michigan is told through the voice of William F. Johnston, the State Discussion Group Leader in charge of Michigan State's work with the PSD.

Concurrently, Schools of Philosophy began to emerge, building on the realization that many Extension agents and other rural leaders had not been trained in fields such as political science, history, sociology, or economics. Administrators believed they needed to utilize these disciplines in their work with rural communities. The story continues through the late 1930s into the 1940s with the United States' entry into World War II. During this time the USDA's action programs shifted to wartime efforts. After the war, the work of the PSD differed dramatically and faced new challenges, such as opposition from previous supporters such as the American Farm

Bureau Federation. Finally, in 1953, the departmental home for the unit was closed, ending a brief period in USDA history when administrators explicitly supported efforts to use discussion as a way to make sense of complex agricultural issues.<sup>74</sup>

Looking at Michigan enables one to see the finer details about what was occurring as well as the philosophy shaping the work from the perspective of those implementing this national adult education initiative. This chapter attends to the way that democracy was actually performed rather than focusing exclusively on the ideas outlined in the aspirational and philosophical statements made by USDA administrators.<sup>75</sup>

As with any history, there will be certain characters selected to tell about this brief chapter in American history.<sup>76</sup> The public philosophies of USDA administrators such as Wallace, Wilson, and Taeusch will be intertwined with the telling of the story, offering insight into the individuals who animated the PSD and who envisioned the USDA as a institution that helped to develop citizens and enliven democracy. The chapter includes the evolution of their thinking as well as events that connect to the tension between problem-solving approaches to public problems and commitments to cultural ideas like democracy. Because of our focus on the public philosophies of individuals such as Wilson, Taeusch, and to a lesser extent Wallace, every detail of the PSD's work is not included. Rather, in order to provide context for understanding this small group of administrators and their desire for greater democratic participation, the

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<sup>74</sup> It should be noted that discussion—both information and formal—among rural men and women had long been an element of Extension's educational work. What made this effort in the 1930s and 1940s stand out was the creation of discussion guides for use by citizens and the commitment at the highest levels of the USDA to support it.

<sup>75</sup> John R. Parkinson, *Democracy and Public Space: The Physical Sites of Democratic Performance* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 9.

<sup>76</sup> History "inevitably sanctions some voices while silencing others." Cronon, "A Place for Stories: Nature, History, and Narrative," 1350.



chapter will offer glimpses into the work in different regions of the county. This includes an in-depth look at Michigan and its State Group Discussion Leader.

Chapter 5 continues the narrative beginning in 1938 with the Mt. Weather Agreement between the USDA and the land-grant colleges and the elevation of the PSD to Division status within the BAE. It explores the development of the PSD and its relationship with the “action programs” of the USDA that would eventually contribute to its diminishment and eventual closure, detailed in Chapter 6. Importantly, these chapters explore the philosophies of the administrators who had the most influence over the PSD’s work. Chapter 6 offers a glimpse into the final years of the truly innovative and dynamic thought of USDA administrators who were attempting to cultivate in rural citizens a sense of civic responsibility and opportunity through group discussion and adult education.

Chapter 7 is an opportunity to look back at the preceding chapters and to have history “help us understand ourselves and our fellows and the problems and prospects” of humanity.<sup>77</sup> This chapter includes a summary, lessons, and a brief discussion about what this story means for the cultivation of deliberative politics today.

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<sup>77</sup> Mattson, *Creating a Democratic Public*, 8.

## CHAPTER 2

### FROM DEPRESSION TO ADJUSTMENT

“Those in charge of the agricultural and rural policies of the New Deal were among the most radical figures in the Roosevelt administration. The secretary of agriculture, Henry A. Wallace, whose father had been secretary during the Warren Harding years, had an almost mystical feeling for the land and a burning desire to help the destitute farmers.” – Morris Dickstein<sup>78</sup>

#### *The Great Depression and a New Direction*

On March 4, 1929, Herbert Hoover took the oath of the office of the president of the United States. Under Republican administrations in the 1920s, the United States attained increased financial comfort. Trumpeting this shift, Hoover said that the United States had been “liberated from widespread poverty.” The 1928 Republican brochure promised “a chicken in every pot and a car in every garage” and this claim was not considered outlandish.<sup>79</sup> Stock values had risen steadily since 1922. The consumer market was booming, with the automobile industry and electronic goods becoming accessible to greater numbers of Americans. With economic change came rapid social and cultural change. There was record prosperity in 1929. America was changing. Then came an unexpected deviation from this march towards progress.

The Great Depression was, according to one author, “Unforeseen and unexpected, inexplicable and inexorable,” impacting the United States well beyond the

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<sup>78</sup> Morris Dickstein, *Dancing in the Dark: A Cultural History of the Great Depression* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2009), 93.

<sup>79</sup> Gene Smiley, *Rethinking the Great Depression* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2002), 3.

fateful Black Tuesday of October 29, 1929.<sup>80</sup> What some first viewed as possibly just a misstep for Wall Street became a catastrophe affecting all aspects of American life. But others saw social, cultural, economic, and political changes brewing for decades.<sup>81</sup> This very dramatic event was simply the breaking point. Regardless of whether the economic collapse came as a surprise or was confirmation of common sense, the impact was real. Nearly one in four workers had no employment. Unable to pay mortgages, many Americans lost their homes and savings.

Rural Americans were not immune. The unprecedented economic crisis struck “first and hardest” at the farm sector. Net income of farm operators in 1932 was less than one-third of what it had been in 1929. Farm prices fell more than 50 percent while the prices for goods and services necessary for farmers fell 32 percent.<sup>82</sup> Farm prices dropped from 55 percent between 1929 and 1932 with perhaps one-third losing their land and livelihood.<sup>83</sup> Low crop yields, notably in 1931, 1934, and 1935, created a need for “feed and seed loans, emergency forage crops, and information on economic feed use.” During the 1930s, farm prices dropped far below the 1910-1914 “parity” level for five of the ten years.<sup>84</sup> In 1932, it was reported that steel plants were

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<sup>80</sup> Robert F. Himmelberg, *The Great Depression and the New Deal* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2001), 3.

<sup>81</sup> Eric Rauchway, *The Great Depression and the New Deal: A Very Short Introduction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 2.

<sup>82</sup> Wayne D. Rasmussen and Gladys L. Baker, “Price and Income Policy for Commercial Agriculture,” in *Agricultural Policy in an Affluent Society*, ed. Vernon W. Ruttan, Arley D. Waldo, and James P. Houck (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1969), 69.

<sup>83</sup> Himmelberg, *The Great Depression and the New Deal*, 9.

<sup>84</sup> E. R. McIntyre, *Fifty Years of Cooperative Extension in Wisconsin, 1912-1962* (Madison, WI: Extension Service, University of Wisconsin, 1962), 122. This time period in the 1910s was known as the golden age of American agriculture because of the relative prosperity farmers found. Between 1900 and 1920 gross farm income doubled with real farm income increasing 40 percent. The value of the average farm—smaller than 150 acres throughout this period—tripled during this period. “Midwestern farmers, especially, were making more money and living better than before,” wrote historian Eric Mogren. But this prosperity would not last. Starting in 1921 and lasting well into Franklin D.

operating at 12 percent capacity with no signs for improvement. In three years, industrial construction slumped from “\$949 million to an unbelievable \$74 million.”<sup>85</sup> The Crash brought devastation to every corner of the country.<sup>86</sup>

Farmers were desperate because they could not sell their products at a profit. They had put their faith in the land. But taxes had steadily risen during the years income declined. Mortgage payments could not be made. Foreclosure meant the loss of a lifetime of savings. By 1932, “even farmers who were usually prosperous were in desperate straits as they faced the likelihood of the loss of their farms through mortgage foreclosures.”<sup>87</sup> All of this was in addition to them facing an agricultural depression dating back more than a decade. Instead of sharing in the prosperity of many Americans from 1923 to 1929, farmers’ economic standing grew steadily worse.<sup>88</sup> By 1932 farmers’ gross income was \$5.3 billion, \$12 billion less than it had been in 1919, and their total debt burden exceeded \$9 billion.<sup>89</sup> The organization of farmers and their threat to disrupt supplies to market through “farmers’ holidays”

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Roosevelt’s administration, farmers would face a prolonged depression. New Deal administrators would look back to this period (particularly 1909 to 1914) when shaping agricultural policies for parity: the relative purchasing power of farmers. See David B. Danbom, *Born in the Country: A History of Rural America* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), 162; Eric W. Mogren, *Native Soil: A History of the Dekalb County Farm Bureau* (Dekalb, IL: Northern Illinois University Press, 2005), 25; Gary D. Libecap, “The Great Depression and the Regulating State: Federal Government Regulation of Agriculture, 1884-1970,” in *The Defining Moment: The Great Depression and the American Economy in the Twentieth Century*, ed. Michael D. Bordo, Claudia Goldin, and Eugene N. White (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1998), 190; Christiana McFadyen Campbell, *The Farm Bureau and the New Deal: A Study of the Making of National Farm Policy, 1933-40* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1962), 4.

<sup>85</sup> William E. Leuchtenburg, *Franklin D. Roosevelt and the New Deal* (New York: Harper & Row, 1963), 1.

<sup>86</sup> Adam Cohen, *Nothing to Fear: FDR’s Inner Circle and the Hundred Days That Created Moderning America* (New York: The Penguin Press, 2009), 1.

<sup>87</sup> Campbell, *The Farm Bureau and the New Deal*, 29.

<sup>88</sup> Samuel Everett and Edmund deS. Brunner, *Helping the Nation by Helping the Farmer*, National Crisis Series (New York: Bureau of Publications, Teachers College, Columbia University, 1933), 3, 4, 7.

<sup>89</sup> Christopher P. Loss, *Between Citizens and the State: The Politics of American Higher Education in the 20th Century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012), 55.

demonstrated the extent to which they were facing desperate times with what political strength and leverage they had.<sup>90</sup> Even the American Farm Bureau Federation accepted the need for something to be done about surpluses. In January 1933, Edward A. O'Neal, head of the American Farm Bureau Federation, warned a Senate subcommittee that, "Unless something is done for the American farmer we will have revolution in the countryside within less than twelve months."<sup>91</sup> The United States Chamber of Commerce expressed equal concern: "America as a whole cannot be prosperous if thirty million people, one-fourth of the population of the United States, are not prosperous."<sup>92</sup> Something like the Agricultural Adjustment Act, Van Perkins wrote, "had become a political, social, and economic necessity."<sup>93</sup>

Shaping Roosevelt's approach to the "farm problem" and the Great Depression was a different philosophy than the one which, broadly speaking, animated Herbert Hoover's administration. The differences between these two presidents were apparent. "Change in political forms is one thing," wrote New Deal critic Raoul E. Desvernine, "but change in political philosophy is quite another."<sup>94</sup> Hoover, an exemplar for his party's embrace of individualism, wrote about democracy as "merely the mechanism which individualism invented as a device that would carry on the necessary political work of its social organization. Democracy arises out of individualism and prospers

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<sup>90</sup> Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., *The Coming of the New Deal, 1933-1935*, The Age of Roosevelt (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1958), 42-44; Leuchtenburg, *Franklin D. Roosevelt and the New Deal*, 51; Cohen, *Nothing to Fear: FDR's Inner Circle and the Hundred Days That Created Modern America*, 124-126; T. H. Watkins, *The Hungry Years: A Narrative History of the Great Depression in America* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1999), 339-391.

<sup>91</sup> Schlesinger, *The Coming of the New Deal*, 27; Wayne D. Rasmussen and Gladys L. Baker, *The Department of Agriculture* (New York: Praeger, 1972), 22.

<sup>92</sup> Everett and Brunner, *Helping the Nation by Helping the Farmer*, 3.

<sup>93</sup> Van L. Perkins, *Crisis in Agriculture: The Agricultural Adjustment Administration and the New Deal, 1933*, vol. 81 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969), 35.

<sup>94</sup> Raoul E. Desvernine, *Democratic Despotism* (New York: Dodd, Mead and Company, 1936), 7.

through it alone.”<sup>95</sup> After leaving office, Hoover would express concern that in the United States and elsewhere, “the whole philosophy of individual liberty [was] under attack.”<sup>96</sup> First and foremost, democracy required strong individuals and this was being lost with the socially-oriented efforts of this successor.

But Hoover was not only concerned about the individual citizen and his or her freedom. He was also shaped tremendously by the Progressive Era’s emphasis on the role of the technocratic expert and social engineering’s promise to identify and ameliorate public problems.<sup>97</sup> He had been groomed in this tradition, looking at issues through a lens of scientific management and was known as the “Great Engineer.”<sup>98</sup> Within this technocratic approach, experts professionally trained (and equipped to do so) addressed public problems the best. There was a role for government and there was a role for citizens; for the later, private life was their realm of concern.

Roosevelt’s “New Deal” exemplified what some saw as a dangerous move on the part of the government into the private lives of citizens. Hoover expressed the belief that, “The most gigantic step morally, spiritually, economically, and governmentally that a nation can take is to shift its fundamental philosophic and social ideas.” And while Hoover was explicit in stating that his critique was not solely

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<sup>95</sup> Herbert Hoover, *American Individualism* (New York: Doubleday, Page and Company, 1923), 48.

<sup>96</sup> ———, *The Challenge to Liberty* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1934), 1. During the same year, Benson Landis wrote, “The dominant philosophies of the people of the United States have been those of *laissez-faire* and rugged individualism. Even though millions of the once rugged had become so ragged as to be in shreds, we had as a nation muddled along, expecting the ‘natural forces’ to bring a turn in the business cycle.” His response was that collectivism would be necessary for the United States, defining “collectivism” as a “willingness to go along with [a] large-group, cooperative effort as we had never seen in peace time in the United States.” See Benson Y. Landis, *Must the Nation Plan? A Discussion of Government Programs* (New York: Association Press, 1934), 8.

<sup>97</sup> See John M. Jordan, *Machine-Age Ideology: Social Engineering and American Liberalism, 1911-1939* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1994); Sullivan, *Work and Integrity*.

<sup>98</sup> Patrick D. Reagan, *Designing a New America: The Origins of New Deal Planning, 1890-1943* (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 1999), 15.

focused on the then current measures, he did note, “An emergency program for recovery is one thing, but to implant a new social philosophy in American life in conflict with the primary concepts of American Liberty in quite another thing.”<sup>99</sup>

One popular narrative about this period has been the stark contrast between Roosevelt and Hoover. This distinction between the “out-of-touch” technocrat embodied in Hoover and the “confident and charismatic” Roosevelt made it clear to some that change was needed.<sup>100</sup> The Republican Party’s concern about the government overstepping its role had not worked. Roosevelt was a politician who promised to act swiftly and surely with bold, persistent experimentation. But as historian Alan Dawley suggests, Roosevelt was more like Hoover than some have made him out to be. “If he had any philosophy,” Dawley wrote, “it was close to the managerialism of the New Era, but without the boosterism.”<sup>101</sup> The difference then was an explicit acknowledgment by Roosevelt that the government had to do something. Unlike Hoover’s timid attempts at revitalizing the failing economy, Roosevelt embraced the use of the government as a social tool.<sup>102</sup> The people wanted “experiment, activity, trial and error, anything that would convey a sense of movement

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<sup>99</sup> Hoover, *The Challenge to Liberty*, 104, 105.

<sup>100</sup> Cohen, *Nothing to Fear: FDR's Inner Circle and the Hundred Days That Created Moderning America*, 4-5.

<sup>101</sup> Alan Dawley, *Struggles for Justice: Social Responsibility and the Liberal State* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1991), 357. Cf. Louis Hartz, *The Liberal Tradition in America: An Interpretation of American Political Thought since the Revolution* (New York: Harvest Book, 1955), 263-264.

<sup>102</sup> Between the inauguration of Roosevelt and the 1939 outbreak of World War II in Europe, the New Deal substantially increased the domestic scope of government. The federal civil service grew from 572,000 employees to one with 920,000; spending doubled from \$4.6 billion to \$8.8 billion. See Ira Katznelson, *Fear Itself: The New Deal and the Origins of Our Time* (New York: Liveright Publishing Corporation, 2013), 36.

and novelty.”<sup>103</sup> In contrast, Hoover stood squarely in two political traditions: modern managerial liberalism and nineteenth-century self-government, both of which opposed such untried tinkering in the lives of Americans.<sup>104</sup>

In his acceptance speech for the Democratic Party’s nomination leading up to the 1932 presidential election, Roosevelt spoke about the striking differences between the Republican and Democratic parties and how men and women throughout the country had been forgotten by “the political philosophy of the government of the last years.” Roosevelt drew his comments to a close with the phrase that would come to embody his presidency: “a new deal for the American people.” But the words that follow this sentence help us to see what Roosevelt envisioned for America. He continued: “Let us all here assembled constitute ourselves prophets of a new order of competence and of courage. This is more than a political campaign; it is a call to arms. Give me your help, not to win votes alone, but to win in this crusade to restore America to its own people.”<sup>105</sup> Positioning himself and those who supported him as prophets speaking and acting against a political philosophy that had failed, Roosevelt offered an alternative path forward that would attempt to reconfigure life for citizens

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<sup>103</sup> Richard Hofstadter, *The American Political Tradition and the Men Who Made It* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1948), 312; Himmelberg, *The Great Depression and the New Deal*, 12; Cohen, *Nothing to Fear: FDR's Inner Circle and the Hundred Days That Created Moderning America*, 5; Richard Hofstadter, *The Age of Reform: From Bryan to F. D. R.* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1968), 314-315. For the text of Roosevelt’s graduation address at Oglethorpe University on May 22, 1932, in which he spoke of “bold, persistent experimentation,” see Mario R. DiNunzio, *Franklin D. Roosevelt and the Third American Revolution* (Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger, 2011), 90-93.

<sup>104</sup> Dawley, *Struggles for Justice*, 344.

<sup>105</sup> “Text of Governor Roosevelt’s Speech at the Convention Accepting the Nomination,” *New York Times*, July 3, 1932, 8. Russell L. Hanson notes the term “New Deal” was not an intended name for his approach to government if elected. It was, according to Hanson, “...an alert cartoonist, who picked up on it and used it to refer to Roosevelt’s ‘program.’ ....It was precisely this atheoretical aspect of the New Deal that led Dewey, the philosopher of experimentation par excellence, to repudiate Roosevelt’s program.” See Russell L. Hanson, *The Democratic Imagination in America: Conversations with Our Past* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985), 276-277.



in the United States. As political scientist and historian Ira Katznelson has written, “[Roosevelt’s] political narrative featured how public policy could overcome fear.”<sup>106</sup> This *fear* was pervasive not only in the United States but also in Europe, especially in Great Britain and France. Writing about the rise and fall of civilizations, Arnold Toynbee warned that, “men and women all over the world [are] seriously contemplating and frankly discussing the possibility that the Western system of society might break down and cease to work.” The pressures on all Western nations, including the United States, was intense.<sup>107</sup>

### *A New Deal*

Referring to it as an experiment unlike anything before, historian Carl Degler was so bold to call the New Deal the “Third American Revolution.”<sup>108</sup> There was some truth to the belief that the New Deal was ushering in a new era as the American public overwhelmingly supported Roosevelt’s efforts, in contrast to returning to the “old, and...wholly discredited ways” of before. As Wilson McWilliams put it, “Business leaders and established political spokesmen were pathetically uncertain, and the mass of Americans were willing to listen to any who seemed to offer a way out.”<sup>109</sup>

In what became known popularly as the First Hundred Days, the beginning of Roosevelt’s presidency brought about dramatic change through the expedient passage

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<sup>106</sup> Katznelson, *Fear Itself*, 35.

<sup>107</sup> Arnold Toynbee, *Survey of International Affairs, 1931* (London: Oxford University Press, 1932), 1; S. McKee Rosen, *Modern Individualism: The Development of Political Thought and Its Present Crisis* (New York: Harper, 1937).

<sup>108</sup> Carl N. Degler, *Out of Our Past: The Forces That Shaped Modern America* (New York: Harper & Brothers, Publishers, 1959), 379-416. In a 1933 *New York Times* article, the phrase “an orderly revolution” appears. “New Deal Philosophy,” *New York Times*, July 16, 1933.

<sup>109</sup> Rauchway, *The Great Depression and the New Deal: A Very Short Introduction*, 2; Wilson C. McWilliams, *The Idea of Fraternity in America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973), 537.

of numerous laws focusing on the economic stability of the nation's financial sector and reviving citizens' faith in the capitalist system they watched fall apart only a few short years earlier. During this period, Roosevelt guided the passage of fifteen major laws to enactment, sent fifteen messages to Congress, delivered ten speeches, and held cabinet meetings twice a week. Things were changing quickly.

Three unprecedented features marked the Hundred Days. First, the executive branch almost entirely drafted, in detail, what the Congress would enact. Second, the legislative process was abbreviated dramatically although, it should be noted, no formal institutional rules were violated. Third, these measures were characterized by immense powers delegated from the legislature to the executive branch, dramatically expanded the powers of federal agencies, many of which were new.<sup>110</sup> The federal government was taking bold steps to address the urgent needs cutting across social and economic lines. Few were spared the long reach of the Great Depression and the administration made it its mission to improve the lives of all Americans.<sup>111</sup>

The executive branch, with a supportive Congress, unleashed a flurry of programs and agencies aimed at ameliorating the problems impacting nearly all aspects of American life. What connected these different elements of the New Deal and what would be popularly referred to as the alphabet agencies was the commitment to planning and the use of trained technical experts (many of them scholars from higher education) to serve as guides into an uncertain future. "The Depression brought

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<sup>110</sup> Katznelson, *Fear Itself*, 123-124.

<sup>111</sup> Schlesinger, *The Coming of the New Deal*, 1-23. This improvement, however, would not embrace all equally. As we will see later with the Agricultural Adjustment Act, the effort to save the American farm economy privileged large-scale agriculture rather than tenant and sharecropping farmers, especially poor and African-American farmers in the South. This trend would continue throughout the New Deal. See Jess Gilbert, "Democratic Planning in Agricultural Policy: The Federal-County Land-Use Planning Program, 1938-1942," *Agricultural History* 70, no. 2 (1996): 246-247.

the expert home to stay,” wrote Jethro K. Lieberman. It also developed and expanded the regulatory state, putting authority into the hands of federal bureaucratic structures.<sup>112</sup>

This flurry of programs and agencies supported, for many, the position that the New Deal was not a unified approach to addressing public problems and that it actually lacked a foundational philosophy. Richard Hofstadter contended, “At the heart of the New Deal...was not a philosophy but a temperament.” The United States faced unprecedented challenges that could not rely on the traditional and accepted philosophies of the day. In Hofstadter’s words: “An era of fumbling and muddling-through was inevitable. Only a leader with an experimental temper would have made the New Deal possible.”<sup>113</sup>

Anthony J. Badger similarly saw Roosevelt’s ideological coherence as lacking, suggesting that Roosevelt had a “flypaper mind that could assimilate contradictory ideals in a way that was logically inconsistent but politically feasible.”<sup>114</sup> Adding to this argument, Patrick Reagan argued, “...the New Deal was not a cohesive whole; rather, it stumbled from program to program, searching for solutions to problems that traditional theories could neither explain nor solve.”<sup>115</sup> For many observers, the New

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<sup>112</sup> Jethro K. Lieberman, *The Tyranny of the Experts: How Professionals Are Closing the Open Society* (New York: Walker and Company, 1970), 50. Lieberman continues: “As regulatory commissions proliferated, as Congressional and executive committee investigations increased and broadened their scopes of inquiry, the expert was imported into every level of governmental thinking. It has hardly been possible since then to tread the daily newspapers without discovering what some ‘expert’ or other thinks about almost any topic under current debate.” Challenges to this regulatory approach would not gain traction until the 1960s when citizens advocated for greater opportunities to participate in political decisions. See Sirianni and Friedland, *Civic Innovation in America*, 10.

<sup>113</sup> Hofstadter, *The American Political Tradition and the Men Who Made It*, 311, 313.

<sup>114</sup> Anthony J. Badger, *The New Deal: The Depression Years, 1933-40* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1989), 6.

<sup>115</sup> Reagan, *Designing a New America*, 15.

Deal was a multifaceted attempt to solve public problems without a guiding principle or intentionality beyond the immediate contexts and determined needs to ameliorate whatever issues confronted the government. It was this perception of Roosevelt and his administration being comprised of experimenters that reinforced a view that they tried approaches without an articulated vision or philosophy behind them.

Others, however, have been more forgiving. Merrill D. Peterson noted how the New Deal “lacked a consistent philosophy, but it possessed a sense of tradition, a faith in democratic ideals, a set of symbols and conventions, which served some of the purposes of a philosophy.”<sup>116</sup> There were, in Peterson’s view, certain ideals. Similarly, Samuel H. Beer wrote:

“...the New Deal consisted not merely of the political and governmental acts constituting the administration of Franklin Roosevelt, but also of a rationale for those acts. In all that furious motion of campaigns, lobbying, and law making, and in the vast and confusing output of statutes, policies, and programs issuing from it, one can discern certain ideas at work.... Certain broad premises gave to the multifarious works of the New Deal a coherence of purpose that made it conceptually not simply a compound of special interests, but also a rationale for the public interest.”<sup>117</sup>

One must critically assess and question statements about the federal government “fumbling through” its work. This is especially important in light of opposing claims such as those from Peterson and Beer. While there was a greater deal of flexibility with respect to how Roosevelt’s administration responded to myriad challenges, underlying most of these efforts was a commitment to utilizing knowledge and

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<sup>116</sup> Merrill D. Peterson, *The Jefferson Image in the American Mind* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1960), 355.

<sup>117</sup> Samuel Hutchison Beer, "In Search of a New Public Philosophy," in *The New American Political System*, ed. Anthony King (Washington, DC: American Enterprise Institute for Public Policy Research, 1978), 5.

expertise to address the challenges citizens faced. Contrasting Hoover's concern that the government should not overreach by entering into the private realm of citizens' lives, Roosevelt saw government having a vital role in ensuring that there would be private lives worth living.

Both Hoover and Roosevelt embraced a philosophy that viewed experts as being essential to solving public problems. The difference, importantly, was that Roosevelt argued that the government needed to play a central role in bringing America back from a sense that democracy might not be the best form of government given the world's circumstances. This contrasted Hoover's more cautious views towards government intervention. Importantly, we do not need to look exclusively to historians writing about this period since there are important perspectives from that time worthy of attention, especially critics of Roosevelt.

A striking critique of Roosevelt and his approach to governance came in the 1936 publication of Raoul E. Desvernine's book *Democratic Despotism*. The book was an attempt to draw attention to and highlight what Desvernine called the "contradictions and incompatibilities" between two competing schools of thought. For him, there were two schools of political thought: "Americanism and the New Despotisms" and then "Constitutional Democracy and the Totalitarian State," to use his terms. His book was an attempt to help his readers see the differences.<sup>118</sup> He outlined the numerous ways New Dealers presented themselves as democrats while purportedly subverting the democratic process by abandoning what he called the "constitutional philosophy" that had guided America's past, defining that philosophy

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<sup>118</sup> Desvernine, *Democratic Despotism*, x.

as a commitment to individual rights.<sup>119</sup> Because of the rise of totalitarianism, authors such as Desvernine expressed concerns that the New Deal was subversively transforming the country into something other than a democracy.

Desvernine adamantly opposed Roosevelt's New Deal. In a speech before the Republican Round Table Luncheon in Chicago on January 15, 1936, Desvernine, a vocal supporter of the American Liberty League, expressed concern about the philosophy shaping the New Deal and articulated a position that would be further developed in *Democratic Despotism*. He noted:

“Too many assume that the New Deal is a haphazard attempt to provide specific remedies for each situation as it arises and that each of these remedies are independent of and not related to each other; that they are dictated solely by expediency, not principle; and therefore are not parts of a coordinated plan. I originally shared this view but as time went on and as I examined one after another of the New Deal proposals, I soon discovered that they all fit together perfectly and collectively expressed a definite and more or less unified plan or philosophy of government.... I firmly believe...that you are today confronted with a choice between two incompatible theories of government.”<sup>120</sup>

For him, the New Deal was an affront to individual freedom and the guiding principles shaping the American experience. “Nations are built out of philosophy,” he wrote, “not out of bricks and mortar. It is their national ideals which shape their national destinies.”<sup>121</sup> There were, to those who shared Desvernine's views, fundamental differences between the ideals set forth by America's founders and what was increasingly becoming the norm for the federal government during the mid-1930s. Desvernine feared what was taking place:

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<sup>119</sup> Ibid., 164.

<sup>120</sup> ———, *Americanism at the Crossroads*, vol. 88, Republican Round Table Luncheon at the Hamilton Republican Club, Chicago, Illinois, January 15, 1936 (Washington, DC: American Liberty League, 1936), 3-4.

<sup>121</sup> ———, *Democratic Despotism*, 231.

“Prophets of the New Deal [were destroying] individual opportunity and enterprise by causing *all* opportunity and enterprise to be absorbed by the State, and by causing each individual to have his share meted out to him by the State. The Founding Fathers liberated the mind: the new Prophets destroy the independence of the mind. Under our Founding Fathers each citizen drew his own design of life: under the Prophets of the New Deal, the design is drawn for him, and he merely traces the pattern given him. He executes the orders from above. One frees Man: the other enslaves him.”<sup>122</sup>

Such language captured a sentiment held by those who believed New Deal efforts altered what it meant to be American and how one was to understand the role of the government. The publication of *Who Owns America* in 1936, a practical follow up to the popular volume *I'll Take My Stand* published in 1930 by Southern agrarians lamenting social, political, and economic change, challenged the increasingly dominant rhetoric of industrialization and centralization in both government and business.<sup>123</sup>

In an appeal to a return of small-scale agriculture and decentralization with respect to social and economic issues, the essays in these volumes questioned the need or value of “progress.” As one author suggested, liberty was to be completely lost unless “patriots.... put a Republican in the White House in place of Mr. Roosevelt.”<sup>124</sup> The problem conservatives faced during this period, Gregory L. Schneider argues, was “determining how to preserve the last vestiges of the inherited constitutional

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<sup>122</sup> Ibid., 235.

<sup>123</sup> Herbert Agar and Allen Tate, eds., *Who Owns America? A New Declaration of Independence* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1936); Twelve Southerners, *I'll Take My Stand: The South and the Agrarian Tradition* (New York: Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1930).

<sup>124</sup> Lyle H. Lanier, “A Critique of the Philosophy of Progress,” in *I'll Take My Stand: The South and the Agrarian Tradition*, ed. Twelve Southerners (New York: Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1930); Henry Clay Evans, “Liberty under the Old Deal,” in *Who Owns America? A New Declaration of Independence*, ed. Herbert Agar and Allen Tate (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1936), 295.

tradition—and other traditions—in an age of mass democracy.”<sup>125</sup> For Southern agrarians, the world they had known was continuing its long march away from strong regionalism to a broader economic reality. Desvernine and others decried the loss of freedom to decide one’s own fate without the government or increasingly powerful corporations and institutions determining how someone should live. Let the heavy hand of the state, Desvernine argued, be explicitly recognized for what it was: a devious attempt to wrap the centralizing powers of government and aligned corporations with “democracy” while dismantling “authentic” democratic life and its associated freedoms.

Yet, conservative reactions were not alone in responding to the changes taking place during the 1930s. For example, Theodore Rosenof wrote about the “democratic left” of the period as being inclusive of people who identified themselves as being “liberals, progressives, New Dealers, radicals, and socialists.”<sup>126</sup> The decade gave life to a fledgling political left in the United States, but it struggled to gain the support found in other countries retreating from democracy and individual liberty. Unlike any other period in American history, the 1930s proved to be a fertile time for left-wing politics. It was for this reason that conservative commentators later viewed this as a “red decade” during which there was a “collapse of faith in capitalism and republican government.” Critics suggested “ominous portents of unlimited executive power and

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<sup>125</sup> Gregory L. Schneider, “Part I: The Old Right,” in *Conservatism in America since 1930: A Reader*, ed. Gregory L. Schneider (New York: New York University Press, 2003), 5.

<sup>126</sup> Theodore Rosenof, *Patterns of Political Economy in America: The Failure to Develop a Democratic Left Synthesis, 1933-1950* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1983), 10.



statist planning [that was] reminiscent of the Soviet Union or Nazi Germany.”<sup>127</sup> But as Norman Mattoon Thomas (the six-time socialist candidate for president) said in 1936, “Mr. Roosevelt did not carry out the Socialist platform, unless he carried it out on a stretcher.”<sup>128</sup>

Noting these critiques is important. How one views the New Deal—either as a collection of loosely associated programs or as a more explicit and intentional effort to rethink the role of government in a democratic society—has implications for what this period means to those looking to learn from what took place, especially if one embraces the position that the New Deal was lacking a philosophical grounding. Viewing the New Deal as haphazard and indiscriminate does a disservice to the efforts by federal agency administrators who helped to develop initiatives that did not fit neatly within a bureaucratic, centralized conception of government.<sup>129</sup> As Desvernine wrote, “Nations are built out of philosophy...not bricks and mortar” and it is important to explore in detail how people such as Wilson, Wallace, and Taesch came to articulate a public philosophy that sought to interweave expertise with a commitment to creating democratic spaces for citizens to learn from one another and to contribute,

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<sup>127</sup> Michael Denning, *The Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Verso, 2010); Schneider, “Part I: The Old Right,” 5.

<sup>128</sup> Norman Mattoon Thomas, “Is the New Deal Socialism?,” in *Contemporary Forum: American Speeches on Twentieth-Century Issues*, ed. Ernest J. Wraga and Barnet Baskerville (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1962), 191.

<sup>129</sup> Taking a big picture view, Ira Katznelson offers an important perspective on the commitment to democracy. He writes, “...the New Deal can be understood as a period of democratic learning and adjustment. Though similar in some ways to paths traveled elsewhere, the New Deal’s course was different. While there were family resemblances to features of governance pursued by the period’s dictatorships, there was not an identity. Constitutional democracy was sustained, if bruised, in the world’s lost long-lived liberal regime, with the legislative authority of Congress intact. Executive and legislative powers remained separate and divided. During the 1930s, as it responded to economic predicaments and offered many institutional inventions, the national government did not create an emergency regime side by side with the normal separation of powers system, even though it seemed, certainly at the start, that this departure from constitutional procedures might be necessary.” Katznelson, *Fear Itself*, 126.

in a broadly conceptualized way, to policy formation at the local, state, and federal levels.<sup>130</sup>

Some of the New Deal initiatives, such as the PSD, were based on particular public philosophies. This is important to acknowledge since the New Deal is often viewed as a massive effort by the federal government and those who support a greater role for citizens instead of a centralized bureaucratic structure often critique it harshly.

One important New Deal critique was and is rooted in the justified claim that the federal government's administration was a central political actor during the period and that it leaned profoundly on experts to fill critical roles. Roosevelt relied heavily on leading intellectuals of the time, turning to a select number of professors who would quickly become known as the "Brains Trust."<sup>131</sup> Beyond this immediate circle of close advisors, there were also many others who came to fill the ranks of the New Deal agencies. This larger group included, "A remarkable host of young, bright, idealistic lawyers, social workers, and engineers" who, in the words of Richard S. Kirkendall, were "service intellectuals—men of academically trained intelligence whose work as intellectuals related closely to affairs of great importance and interest to men outside of the university."<sup>132</sup>

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<sup>130</sup> Desvernine, *Democratic Despotism*, 231.

<sup>131</sup> It should be noted that the more common reference to these intellectuals is the "Brain Trust," but two of the individuals included in this circle of academics—Raymond Moley and Rexford Tugwell—insist the proper name is "Brains Trust." Cited in Howard Zinn, "Introduction," in *New Deal Thought*, ed. Howard Zinn (New York: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1966), xv. Cf. Badger, *The New Deal*, 6.

<sup>132</sup> ———, *The New Deal*, 6; Richard S. Kirkendall, "Franklin D. Roosevelt and the Service Intellectual," *The Mississippi Valley Historical Review* 49, no. 3 (1962): 456. Kirkendall contrasted service intellectuals with their disengaged counterparts: "Contrasting sharply with those men of ideas who could not tolerate the nearly overwhelming pressure of affairs in America, service intellectuals interpreted their role in terms of active service to their society."

Playing essential roles in bringing the New Deal to life, these intellectuals developed new roles for the federal government. Building on a tradition that took hold during the Progressive Era, administrators embraced technocratic approaches to address the many challenges facing the nation.<sup>133</sup> They utilized their academic pedigrees to creatively address problems. But as we will see with individuals such as Wallace, Wilson, and Taeusch in the USDA, the ways these professionals viewed

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<sup>133</sup> Sandel, *Democracy's Discontent*, 251. These competing approaches included advocates for decentralizing the economy and increasing competition as well as advocates for a rationalized economy based on national economic planning. These traditions had roots established earlier in the century, namely the Progressive Era. This earlier period brought forth what scholars have called the “age of the expert.” That is, professionals shaped by an ideology that embraced social engineering approaches (broadly conceptualized) to public problems. Frederick W. Taylor’s 1911 book, *The Principles of Scientific Management*, proved to be the seminal text for thinking about organizational management and scientific efficiency and influenced many in the following decades. See Frederick W. Taylor, *The Principles of Scientific Management* (New York: Harper Brothers, 1911); Fischer, *Technocracy and the Politics of Expertise*; Brint, *In an Age of Experts*; Jordan, *Machine-Age Ideology: Social Engineering and American Liberalism, 1911-1939*.

But, importantly, the Progressive Era was caught between two, contradictory tendencies. As William Sullivan has noted, “On the one hand, many Progressives promoted scientific expertise and technical efficiency as the keys to a more advanced form of society. On the other hand, Progressives also looked to civic ideals that seemed to require a moral and political integration of life which could only be achieved if modern citizens could be educated to a high level of public participation. Were social action and political reform to be conceived as tools wielded by superior experts or as processes of mutual involvement between civic educators and organizers seeking to enlist a broad public? This opposition within the movement simultaneously played out in the evolution of the professions as the tension between technical and civic models of professionalism.” Sullivan, *Work and Integrity*, 101. On this tension, see also James A. Morone, *The Democratic Wish: Popular Participation and the Limits of American Government* (New York: Basic Books, 1990), 97-128; Leon Fink, *Progressive Intellectuals and the Dilemmas of Democratic Commitment* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997), 13; Camilla Stivers, *Bureau Men, Settlement Women: Constructing Public Administration in the Progressive Era* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2000), 5; Andrew Jewett, *Science, Democracy, and the American University: From the Civil War to the Cold War* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 12.

By the start of the New Deal, there was a pervasive expansion of value-free conceptions of science intertwined with managerial forms of liberalism, both relying heavily on the development of expert models of governance, leadership, and education. The idea that progressives simply became supporters of the New Deal requires a great deal of nuance. As Peter Levine noted, “...it is instructive that of 204 prominent, self-described ‘progressives’ who survived until 1937, just 40 supported the New Deal.” *ibid.*, 225; Eldon J. Eisenach, *The Lost Promise of Progressivism* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 1994), 260-266; Peter Levine, *The New Progressive Era: Toward a Fair and Deliberative Democracy* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2000), 41. For a brief historical perspective on the “heroic” model of science and the origins of scientific neutrality, see Appleby, Hunt, and Jacob, *Telling the Truth About History*, 15-51. Scientific management was the dominant philosophy of administrative reform from the 1930s to the 1960s, shaping much of how the federal government functioned. See Paul Charles Light, *A Government Ill Executed: The Decline of the Federal Service and How to Reverse It* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008), 169.

themselves and their work reveals a more complex nature of what it meant to be a New Deal intellectual and administrator, particularly as individuals who valued and explicitly framed their vision for the Department through a democratic lens.<sup>134</sup> The next section looks at how the Roosevelt administration, in collaboration with leading farm organizations, responded to the diminished economic outlook because of abundant yields and low market prices.

### *Adjusting Agriculture: Drastic Measures for Dramatic Times*

When the drafting of the Agricultural Adjustment Act was taking place, leaders from some of the most important farm organizations—the American Farm Bureau Federation, the National Grange, the National Farmers Union, and the leading cooperatives—joined together with the USDA in working out the details of what should be done to help American farmers. Before the end of the meeting of these varied organizations, agreement was reached: “broad emergency powers should be conferred upon the Secretary of Agriculture to use any or all of the devices currently proposed to restore agriculture to a parity price basis...” as one author put it.<sup>135</sup> The conditions were so serious that even the conservative Farm Bureau had to back away from its corporate connections and align with rival farm organizations in a call for federal action to inflate prices for farm commodities.<sup>136</sup> According to Clifford V.

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<sup>134</sup> One example of this is from Wilson’s work with the AAA and the domestic allotment plan in the following section. In a discussion about the best way forward for operationalizing the allotment plan, Wilson was emphatic that the plan had to be “decentralized and democratic.” See Schlesinger, *The Coming of the New Deal*, 37-38.

<sup>135</sup> Orville Merton Kile, *The Farm Bureau through Three Decades* (Baltimore: Waverly Press, 1948), 199.

<sup>136</sup> Dawley, *Struggles for Justice*, 353. Farm organizations had roots in the agrarian movements of the late nineteenth century. As David B. Danbom has written, “late-nineteenth-century farmers were increasingly vulnerable to forces beyond their control. In particular, they struggled with the three Ms—

Gregory, the editor-in-chief of *Prairie Farmer*, this meeting was the most harmonious farm meeting that had ever taken place with these various groups.<sup>137</sup>

Previous differences among organizations such as the Grange, Farmers Union, and Farm Bureau were less important than the most pressing issue they faced collectively—increasing the income of farmers. Wallace would later speak about this meeting saying, “To me, it was important to have the farm organizations feel that they were a part of what we would be proposing legislatively. The Farm Bureau felt that it had a voice – the Grange felt that it had a voice – the cooperatives to a lesser extent – the Farmers Union felt more or less out of it at that time.”<sup>138</sup> There was an overall unified front on the part of those most concerned about American agriculture.

Supporting this rapid policy development and agreement was the fact that New Deal farm policy did not depart greatly from Hoover’s earlier policies. Only a few years

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markets, middlemen, and money.” Similarly, Elizabeth Sanders has written the “farmer’s enemy was not an employer but a *system*.” These challenges gave birth to the agrarian political movements such as the Grange, the Farmers’ Alliance, and the Populist Party. See Danbom, *Born in the Country*, 134; Elizabeth Sanders, *Roots of Reform: Farmers, Workers, and the American State, 1877-1917* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1999), 101. For a brief introduction to some of these organizations, see Kile, *The Farm Bureau through Three Decades*, 4-23. For a more thorough, albeit early history of farm organizations, see Edward Wiest, *Agricultural Organization in the United States* (Lexington, KY: University of Kentucky, 1923).

<sup>137</sup> Clifford V. Gregory, “The American Farm Bureau Federation and the A. A. A.,” *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 179(1935): 156. Historically, these farm organizations had somewhat tense relationships, especially as the Farm Bureau established itself as a national organization in 1920 closely aligned with Extension and became the lead organization in the burgeoning Farm Bloc, shifting from its educational focus to legislative and business activities. On the development of the Farm Bureau, see Kile, *The Farm Bureau through Three Decades*, 32; Baker, *The County Agent*, 17-18; Orville Merton Kile, *The Farm Bureau Movement* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1921), 113; Baker, *The County Agent*, 19; William J. Block, *The Separation of the Farm Bureau and the Extension Service: Political Issue in a Federal System*, vol. 47, *Illinois Studies in the Social Sciences* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1960), 10. On the shift from educational to legislative and business interests, see Baker, *The County Agent*, 19; Wesley McCune, *The Farm Bloc* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, Doran and Company, 1943), 165; Campbell, *The Farm Bureau and the New Deal*, 7. Campbell begins her book this way: “One of the phenomena of twentieth-century American history is the genesis of the Farm Bureau as a crusading educational agency, and its evolution in less than a quarter of a century into an extraordinarily influential force in the political arena.”

<sup>138</sup> Henry A. Wallace, “Reminiscences of Henry Agard Wallace,” *Oral History Collection* (New York: Columbia University, 1976), 211.

earlier (and with help from the Farm Bureau), the Hoover administration worked on a plan for crop reduction to increase the prices of farm commodities. Roosevelt's advisors would turn this approach into the centerpiece of its farm program.<sup>139</sup>

On May 12, 1933, the New Deal established the Agricultural Adjustment Administration (AAA) within the USDA through the passage of the Agricultural Adjustment Act, the most important agency established during the First Hundred Days, according to one author.<sup>140</sup> Through this action, the "new Department of Agriculture" was born and the "picture" of the New Deal became clearer, offering benefits to organized labor and farmers.<sup>141</sup> Working with Extension agents in rural counties, the AAA made payments to farmers in return for reduced crops. In short, it was a production control measure. It benefited most farmers, but it was especially beneficial to those who were commercially successful. For farm workers, sharecroppers, and tenants, the reduction program had adverse effects.<sup>142</sup> Hofstadter wrote about the AAA as part of the core of the first New Deal, representing its basic

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<sup>139</sup> Dawley, *Struggles for Justice*, 366.

<sup>140</sup> R. Douglas Hurt, "Foreword," *Farming the Dust Bowl: A First-Hand Account from Kansas*, ed. Lawrence Svoboda (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, [1940] 1986), 18. Because of the nature of the USDA during the New Deal and the fluidity of some USDA administrators transitioning into different roles, we must frame the work of the USDA's Program Study and Discussion unit within the larger USDA context. Additionally, the AAA was the original institutional home for the Program Study and Discussion initiative.

<sup>141</sup> Gladys L. Baker et al., *Century of Service: The First 100 Years of the United States Department of Agriculture* (Washington, DC: Centennial Committee, U. S. Department of Agriculture, 1963), 245; Benjamin Roth, *The Great Depression: A Diary*, ed. James Ledbetter and Daniel B. Roth (New York: Public Affairs, 2009), 131.

<sup>142</sup> Gilbert, "Low Modernism and the Agrarian New Deal," 132. Charles M. Hardin noted that Congress attempted to favor tenants and small farmers in the law, but the AAA obligation to bolstering farm prices meant that the program would have to favor commercial farmers. See Charles M. Hardin, *The Politics of Agriculture: Soil Conservation and the Struggle for Power in Rural America* (Glencoe, IL: The Free Press, 1952), 132; Dale Harrington, "New Deal Farm Policy and Oklahoma Populism," in *Studies in the Transformation of U.S. Agriculture*, ed. A. Eugene Havens, et al. (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1986), 190-191.

plans through the “retrogressive idea of recovery through scarcity.”<sup>143</sup> The “beauty” of the domestic allotment plan, according to Anthony J. Badger, was that it combined “voluntarism, positive incentives for farmers to cut their acreage, and a mechanism for effective enforcement.”<sup>144</sup> O’Neal went on the air with a speech titled “The Dawn of a New Day for American Agriculture.”<sup>145</sup> There was great hope for farmers and for those who were invested in agriculture. There needed to be. Things had seemingly reached the cliff and now there was help to pull American agriculture back from the abyss.

One of the central questions about the Agricultural Adjustment Act was how it was to be implemented at the national scale. When it was enacted two months after Roosevelt took office, the AAA was an emergency agency. The Act provided little guidance for the establishment of a permanent organization and much authority was left to the Secretary of Agriculture in this regard. One of the most important decisions made with respect to the AAA by the Roosevelt administration was the placement of it within the USDA. Most other New Deal agencies and organizations were established as independent agencies reporting directly to the president.<sup>146</sup> Because of the placement of the AAA, Secretary Wallace ended up having final authority rather than

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<sup>143</sup> Hofstadter, *The American Political Tradition and the Men Who Made It*, 328.

<sup>144</sup> Badger, *The New Deal*, 150. M. L. Wilson’s position on domestic allotment was that it should be “decentralized in its administration and should not build up a great bureaucracy. It should be operated largely on a county, a township, or school district basis, and the expense of administration should be borne by the producers benefitted and not by the general public.” As much as possible, decision-making should reside with farmers. Wilson was explicit: the plan was open to all but not compulsory. Farmers who chose not to participate “may go ahead and produce as much as he desires, receiving the world price and none of the benefits from the plan.” See M. L. Wilson, *Farm Relief and the Domestic Allotment Plan* (Minneapolis: The University of Minnesota Press, 1933), 28.

<sup>145</sup> Kile, *The Farm Bureau through Three Decades*, 202.

<sup>146</sup> Perkins, *Crisis in Agriculture*, 79-80.

the head of the AAA.<sup>147</sup> But who were these individuals at the heart of the New Deal USDA who would have a degree of autonomy unlike many other New Deal administrators?

President Roosevelt appointed Henry A. Wallace to serve as Secretary of Agriculture, a position his father held during the Harding and Coolidge administrations starting in 1921. In turn, Wallace would reach out to Milburn Lincoln Wilson—known to virtually everyone as “M. L.”—to help shape the USDA in a way that would embody its commitment to both solving agricultural problems and having the Department base its work on democratic ideas. However, to better understand their actions and intentions, it is important to have a better sense of who they were and what they thought before leading the USDA.<sup>148</sup> Additionally, a brief background of the formation of the American Farm Bureau Federation and the Cooperative Extension Service helps to contextualize the various positions and dynamic present in the 1930s and beyond.

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<sup>147</sup> As it will be noted in the next chapter, Wallace’s influence over the work of the AAA helped to create the PSD unit. Because of his interests related to greater participation and involvement in democracy on the part of farmers, Wallace’s influence over the AAA was instrumental in the USDA’s later work with communities.

<sup>148</sup> There are a number of sources in which the lives of Henry A. Wallace and M. L. Wilson are detailed. It is beyond the scope of this dissertation to attempt to present their lives in detail, as others have done much more thoroughly. For Wallace, see John C. Culver and John Hyde, *American Dreamer: The Life and Times of Henry A. Wallace* (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 2000); Graham White and John Maze, *Henry A. Wallace: His Search for a New World Order* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1995); Edward L. Schapsmeier and Frederick H. Schapsmeier, *Henry A. Wallace of Iowa: The Agrarian Years, 1910-1940* (Ames, IA: The Iowa State University Press, 1968). For Wilson, see McDean, “M. L. Wilson and Agricultural Reform in Twentieth Century America”; Mont H. Saunderson, “M. L. Wilson: A Man to Remember,” *Montana: The Magazine of Western History* 34, no. 4 (1984); Roy E. Huffman, ed. *Agricultural Statesmen: Proceedings of the M.L. Wilson Symposium, July 25-27, 1966* (Bozeman, MT: Big Sky Books, 1977). For a summary of some of the central actors of the USDA during this period, see Jess Gilbert, “Agrarian Intellectuals in a Democractizing State,” in *The Countryside in the Age of the Modern State: Political Histories of Rural America*, ed. Catherine McNicol Stock and Robert D. Johnston (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001); ———, “Eastern Urban Liberals and Midwestern Agrarian Intellectuals: Two Group Portraits of Progressives in the New Deal Department of Agriculture,” *Agricultural History* 74, no. 2 (2000).



### *Wallace and Wilson: Early Foundations*

Henry A. Wallace came from a family with strong ties to both agriculture and politics. Born in Iowa in 1888 without fanfare (and without a birth certificate until he reached adulthood and held high public office), he went to Iowa State and graduated in 1910. From an early age he was interested in agriculture and later gained fame for his work on hybrid corn seeds as a geneticist. As a child he was fascinated with plants. In the words of John C. Culver and John Hyde, “everything about plants was a matter of intense interest” for Wallace.<sup>149</sup>

In the mid 1920s, Wallace helped to create a commercial hybrid corn seed that continues as a leading corn seed today.<sup>150</sup> He had a national reputation as a plant breeder, economist, and farm journalist and editor of the family paper, the *Wallaces’ Farmer*. He was known and respected in agricultural states and was an asset to the newly elected Roosevelt. At the age of forty-five, he stepped into the role of Secretary of Agriculture at a tumultuous time. The benefit of Wallace’s varied background enabled him to “talk the technical language of the Department’s specialists and the language of the working press.” He was respected by employees of the USDA, “from messengers to bureau chiefs.”<sup>151</sup>

But another element of Wallace’s identity and philosophy was rooted in his desire to understand the world through a lens less scientific and more philosophical and spiritual. For this reason, he has been referred to as “Wallace the mystic, the

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<sup>149</sup> Culver and Hyde, *American Dreamer*, 25.

<sup>150</sup> Ibid., 82-83. Wallace helped found the Hi-Bred Corn Company, which, through various acquisitions and sales, is now part of Dupont Pioneer. See Andrew Pollack, “Monsanto and Dupont Settle Fight over Patent Licensing,” *New York Times*, May 27, 2013, 8.

<sup>151</sup> Rasmussen and Baker, *The Department of Agriculture*, 27.

prophet, the ardent seeker of cosmic truth.”<sup>152</sup> For him, religion was not something disconnected from his philosophical outlook on life. In *Statesmanship and Religion*, he wrote, “Religion to my mind is the most practical thing in the world. In so saying I am not talking about church-going, charity, or any of the other outward manifestations of what is popularly called religion. By religion I mean the force which governs the attitude of men in their inmost hearts toward God and toward their fellowmen.”<sup>153</sup> Historians Schapsmeier and Schapsmeier have written that Wallace’s favorite form of rhetoric was the vocabulary of theology and, at times, he “sounded like an angry prophet straight out of the Old Testament, while on other occasions...[he] preached the gentle precepts of the Sermon on the Mount.”<sup>154</sup> For him, political office afforded an opportunity to both impact the desperate state of agriculture while also positioning himself as a contributor to the long-term project of remaking society through more values-based approaches.

Building on social gospel theology as well as training in agriculture economics, Wallace’s political philosophy was “rational and coherent, although it was often misunderstood.”<sup>155</sup> He drew on many sources to articulate his philosophy of reform. Wallace sought to make it clear that the AAA was more than an agency dispensing benefits to farmers. It was also an agent of progress and reform. The same could be said about the USDA. Throughout his time as Secretary, Wallace viewed his role as one that enabled him to create opportunities for farm men and women to become more active and engaged in public life through cooperative relationships with

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<sup>152</sup> Culver and Hyde, *American Dreamer*, 76.

<sup>153</sup> Henry A. Wallace, *Statesmanship and Religion* (New York: Round Table Press, 1934), 116.

<sup>154</sup> Schapsmeier and Schapsmeier, *Henry A. Wallace of Iowa*, 185.

<sup>155</sup> *Ibid.*, 186.

others. Russell Lord quotes Wallace as saying, “What we’ve got to do is find a way to make a machine-age democracy effective.”<sup>156</sup> This meant not only greater participation by farm men and women, but also that there was a crucial role for “engineers, scientists, and sociologists” to use their knowledge and talent as society needed.<sup>157</sup> Wallace envisioned an ideal cooperative society inclusive of farmers in rural communities and their urban counterparts, but he also recognized the responsibility of a federal agency such as the USDA and the crucial role for experts to help realize his goals. Importantly, Wallace was the person who wielded the most influence over New Deal agricultural policy. This meant his beliefs and philosophies had broad implications for rural Americans—and, increasingly, urban Americans as well.<sup>158</sup>

Like Wallace, M. L. Wilson also grew up on a farm in Iowa. He was educated, like Wallace, at Iowa State University, studied agriculture, and graduated in 1906. Instead of continuing his education immediately, he became a tenant farmer in Nebraska for a few years (1907-1909) before moving to Montana to homestead. In 1910 Wilson accepted a position at Montana State College as Assistant State Agronomist in the new Extension Service. He quickly moved up the ranks: two years later he became the first county agent in the state and then in 1915 took a new position as Montana State Extension Agent Leader, head of the agency.

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<sup>156</sup> Russell Lord, *The Agrarian Revival: A Study of Agricultural Extension* (New York: American Association for Adult Education; George Grady Press, 1939), 152-153.

<sup>157</sup> Schapsmeier and Schapsmeier, *Henry A. Wallace of Iowa*, 189.

<sup>158</sup> Loss, *Between Citizens and the State*, 56. Wallace’s role was crucial since Roosevelt’s view of farmers was that they were a “single phalanx of propertied producers” and were only distinguished by the commodity—wheat, corn, cotton, etc.—they produced. See Dawley, *Struggles for Justice*, 366.

It was during his time in Montana that he maintained correspondence with R. T. Ely of the University of Wisconsin and received encouragement to pursue graduate studies. He took a sabbatical and enrolled in an agricultural economic program in Madison in September of 1919, graduating a year later with a master's of science degree. But studying agricultural economics was not all Wilson did while he was at the University of Wisconsin. Instead, it was the opportunity to study a variety of academic disciplines that proved to be the most beneficial to him as he learned about the intellectual discourses that formed his understanding of complex public problems requiring multiple perspectives if they were to be improved.<sup>159</sup>

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<sup>159</sup> M. L. Wilson, "Reminiscences of Milburn Lincoln Wilson," Oral History Collection, New York, Columbia University, 275, 307; Jess Gilbert and Ellen R. Baker, "Wisconsin Economists and New Deal Agricultural Policy: The Legacy of Progressive Professors," *The Wisconsin Magazine of History* 80, no. 4 (1997): 305-306. After completing his master's degree in agricultural economics at Wisconsin, Wilson pursued a doctorate in philosophy, on a part-time basis at both the University of Chicago and at Cornell University. He took courses one quarter each academic year between 1920 and 1923, but never completed the degree.

In Wilson's oral history, he spoke about the importance of studying philosophy, history, and other fields and the "deep impression" John R. Commons and James H. Tufts, the Progressive philosopher who was a colleague and coauthor with John Dewey, had on his thinking about democracy and the relationship between individuals and society. Wilson noted that during his time at Wisconsin, he learned about much more than simply agricultural economics.

In a particularly lengthy statement, Wilson spoke about Commons' definition of democracy which he said very much influenced his own thinking about democracy: "If you carried the idea of the individual to an extreme, you had anarchy. If you carried the idea of the group or labor union to an extreme, you had syndicalism. If you carried the idea of the state to an extreme, you had socialism. But democracy was something that had involved in it the individual and certain degrees of liberty, and responsibility of the individual. It had involved in it group action, and it had involved in it the state. These three forces were pulling against each other, so to speak, in democracy. If the individual, moving in the direction of anarchy, pulled too strong or too far, it met the resistance of the group forces and the forces of the state. By the same illustration, if the forces of the state disrupted this equilibrium, so to speak, and pulled too far, it was checked by the resistance of the individual and the group. Therefore, in a democratic society these three forces were pulling against each other, and there is a kind of equilibrium that prevented any of them from going to an extreme." Wilson, "Reminiscences of Milburn Lincoln Wilson," 315, 320-323, 301-302. See also Gilbert and Baker, "Wisconsin Economists and New Deal Agricultural Policy: The Legacy of Progressive Professors," 304-308.

Related, it is important to note that in addition to Wilson, Carl F. Taeusch's philosophy shared similarities with that of Tufts. See Richard S. Kirkendall, *Social Scientists and Farm Politics in the Age of Roosevelt* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1966), 143.

While a professor of agricultural economics, he became an advocate of what would become the domestic allotment plan used by the AAA.<sup>160</sup> He remained in this position until 1924 when he became the director of the USDA's Division of Farm Management and Cost Accounting. Repeating the ascent he experienced at Montana State, the election of Roosevelt in 1932 saw Wilson charged with the task of organizing the wheat program of the AAA in 1933, heading the Subsistence Homesteads Division of the Department of the Interior, and then serving as Assistant Secretary of Agriculture from 1934 to 1937. A few years later, Wilson would serve as Under Secretary from 1937 to 1940 and then as Director of Extension Work from 1940 to 1953.<sup>161</sup>

Wilson's appointment as Assistant Secretary was due, in part, to Wallace's "buckling beneath...extensive pressures" to create the Office of Under Secretary of Agriculture because of the ever-increasing responsibilities of the New Deal agricultural programs. He moved then-Assistant Secretary Rexford Tugwell into the new post. Filling Tugwell's position was Wilson who, according to Harry C. McDean, got along better with farmers, their representatives in Congress, and those in government agencies. Unlike Tugwell who looked at agricultural issues from a distance and as an "eastern liberal" who did not have experience of rural or farm life,

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<sup>160</sup> McDean noted that Wilson, especially in the 1920s, was not a great original thinker but was, according to Philip Glick, "a good listener and was deft both at synthesizing the ideas of others and at finding a way to make them useful." He was excited by the different styles of economic and social thought because, he realized, "the causes of the depression [of the 1920s] were complex and by limiting his search he could neither understand nor hope to resolve them." McDean, "M. L. Wilson and Agricultural Reform in Twentieth Century America", 126, 128.

<sup>161</sup> "Milburn L. Wilson (1885-1969)," *American Journal of Agricultural Economics* 52, no. 4 (1970): 634. Mont H. Saunderson wrote about Wilson's interests turning to "matters of national economic and social policies" and how Wilson became "one of the national figures in the drive for the development of national economic policies and programs in agriculture." Saunderson, "M. L. Wilson: A Man to Remember," 62.

Wilson had lived the life of a farmer and was “reputed for his ability to get along with farmers, farm organization leaders, and agricultural workers in state and federal agencies.”<sup>162</sup>

But Wilson was more than someone with experience on farms. He was, according to Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., a “gentle, shaggy zealot, forty-eight years old, combining a farmer’s passion for the soil with an ideologue’s conviction that civilization rested on its agricultural base.” He was someone who could barely afford the “Pullman fare or a two dollar hotel room,” when he traveled, corresponded, and spoke about the allotment idea “without rest” throughout 1931 and 1932. Wallace would go on to tell Wilson that such a plan would work only if the country was headed toward state socialism. But with the continued losses in farm commodity prices, this was becoming more of a plausible direction. Wilson sustained enough attention on the allotment idea to have it come to fruition through the AAA.<sup>163</sup>

Similar to Wallace, Wilson was shaped by philosophical and ethical questions in his life. Religion, and more specifically spirituality, played an important role in Wilson’s early life in the rural Midwest. In his spiritual autobiography, he recalled the church his family attended and noted how its organization “was very democratic.” He recounted experiences of when his parents helped him to see differences not as impediments when interacting or working with other people, but as opportunities to see the world in different ways. As Wilson would say in his spiritual autobiography, “If any of my friends would be so generous as to say that I tend to tolerance and

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<sup>162</sup> "M. L. Wilson Moved to Tugwell's Post," *New York Times*, January 1, 1937; McDean, "M. L. Wilson and Agricultural Reform in Twentieth Century America", 413.

<sup>163</sup> Schlesinger, *The Coming of the New Deal*, 36; Lord, *The Agrarian Revival*, 147.

consideration of others, the credit should not be given to me. It should be related back to my boyhood days and the influences of my parents and our neighborhood in shaping my personality.”<sup>164</sup> In later years, Wilson’s desire to create opportunities for people to come together, often with some degree of disagreement about what should be done with respect to agricultural, political, or social issues, reflected back on his earliest years. And while others viewed Wallace’s mysticism, religious language, and imagery as something foreign, Wilson was attuned to such a worldview because of his own experiences.<sup>165</sup>

For Wallace and Wilson, philosophical questions deeply informed both policy and practice. Wilson believed that a democracy could not succeed unless the “mass of the people” participated in the affairs of government. “Only their participation makes a democracy work,” he wrote.<sup>166</sup> He longed for a society where people would “search their souls for the deeper, more fundamental philosophical meanings of democracy” and create new adaptations of democratic processes in regards to government as well community life.<sup>167</sup> Wallace expressed appreciation for the movement away from rugged individualism to a new way of life that took seriously the general welfare of others and one that valued cooperative relationships.<sup>168</sup>

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<sup>164</sup> M. L. Wilson, "M. L. Wilson," in *American Spiritual Autobiographies*, ed. Louis Finkelstein (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1948), 9.

<sup>165</sup> Gilbert, "Eastern Urban Liberals and Midwestern Agrarian Intellectuals: Two Group Portraits of Progressives in the New Deal Department of Agriculture," 177.

<sup>166</sup> M. L. Wilson, "Society and the Farmer Have Mutual Interests in the Land," *Soil Conservation* 3, no. 5 (1937): 118.

<sup>167</sup> ———, "Facets of County Planning: I. On Using Democracy," *Land Policy Review* 2, no. 1 (1939): 2.

<sup>168</sup> Henry A. Wallace, "The Farmer and Social Discipline," *Journal of Farm Economics* 16, no. 1 (1934); ———, *Technology, Corporations, and the General Welfare* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 1937), 80.

Importantly, both Wallace and Wilson came of age during the Progressive Era and in rural contexts. They were shaped by the ongoing debates about the challenges and possible futures for rural communities as well as the broader shifts taking place within American culture. Particularly important were the efforts during the Progressive Era to help citizens have a sense of being interdependent and to see themselves as critical actors in political life. In addition to the importance of the Progressive Era, Wallace and Wilson were both shaped by and part of the rural education movement embodied in Cooperative Extension and its close relationship with the Farm Bureau. As two institutions central to this story, it is essential to give a brief background as to how they developed, often in a codependent way.

### ***The Formative Period: Extension and the Farm Bureau***

On March 1, 1911, the Chamber of Commerce in Binghamton, New York, in partnership with the Delaware & Lackawanna Railroad, USDA, and with the New York State College of Agriculture at Cornell University serving as a general adviser, established the first farm bureau with a county agricultural agent. The Chamber was interested in “developing and maintaining a whole agricultural status in the territory contiguous to its own city.” As Orville Merton Kile put it, “What actuated [community leaders] was a realization of the fact that farming is the basic industry, and that no urban community depending upon the trade of the rural territory surrounding it can long prosper unless the region that feeds it is also prosperous. They likewise realized that no nation can continue to prosper unless agriculture thrives.” Just a few weeks later, on March 20, 1911, John H. Barron, a Cornell University graduate, became the



“first ‘farm bureau’ representative in the United States,” and utilized the educational demonstration method pioneered by Seaman A. Knapp across the South.<sup>169</sup>

The passage of the Smith-Lever Act on May 8, 1914 codified what had been taking place for decades, particularly in the South.<sup>170</sup> The legislation provided federal funds to hire county agricultural agents and home demonstration agents (women who worked with rural women, primarily on domestic issues) when states and counties matched those funds.<sup>171</sup> By January 1, 1915, there were approximately 1,000 county agricultural agents across the United States.<sup>172</sup> However, passage of the Smith-Lever Act required multiple, failed attempts between 1909 and 1914 because of a political climate that included deep suspicion about the role of the federal government in state and local matters.<sup>173</sup> The establishment of Cooperative Extension was, as Paul Conkin wrote, “in effect, the final expansion of the Morrill Act.” The Extension Service became the “most ubiquitous facet of the huge Department of Agriculture bureaucracy.”<sup>174</sup> Yet, simultaneously, the Smith-Lever Act served “almost as much as charter for the Farm Bureau as it [did] for the Extension Service” since it “specifically

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<sup>169</sup> Wiest, *Agricultural Organization in the United States*, 503; Alfred Charles True, *A History of Agricultural Extension Work in the United States, 1785-1923*, United States Department of Agriculture Miscellaneous Publication (Washington, DC: United States Government Printing Office, 1928), 73; Baker, *The County Agent*, 15; Charles Louis Lang, "A Historical Review of the Forces That Contributed to the Formation of the Cooperative Extension Service" (Doctoral Dissertation, Michigan State University, 1975), 142; Kile, *The Farm Bureau Movement*, 81-82, 94-95. On the parallel development of the Extension Service and Farm Bureau, see Block, *The Separation of the Farm Bureau and the Extension Service*, 4-21.

<sup>170</sup> On the development leading to the creation of the Cooperative Extension system, see Roy Vernon Scott, *The Reluctant Farmer: The Rise of Agricultural Extension to 1914* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1970).

<sup>171</sup> Danbom, *Born in the Country*, 174.

<sup>172</sup> Kile, *The Farm Bureau through Three Decades*, 35.

<sup>173</sup> David B. Danbom, *The Resisted Revolution: Urban America and the Industrialization of Agriculture, 1900-1930* (Ames, IA: The Iowa State University Press, 1979), 72-74; Mogren, *Native Soil*, 35-36.

<sup>174</sup> Paul Keith Conkin, *A Revolution Down on the Farm: The Transformation of American Agriculture since 1929* (Lexington, KY: The University of Kentucky Press, 2008), 23.

recognized contributions from private individuals as a legitimate part of state matching funds.”<sup>175</sup>

With national, state, and local support, the county agent idea “burst forth almost simultaneously in a number of places,” with growing support for county farm bureaus to federate into state and national organizations. On February 12, 1919, only two years after the first state federation was established, a national federation was coming to fruition. Representatives from 12 states met in Ithaca, New York, to discuss the formation of a national farm-bureau federation.<sup>176</sup> The next year, 1920, the American Farm Bureau Federation was made permanent when 28 states ratified its constitution in Chicago.<sup>177</sup>

The birth of the American Farm Bureau Federation is important because of its intimate and intertwined existence with Extension and the shift that occurred when the Farm Bureau became a national organization wielding influence in Washington, DC. As it transitioned from a locally based institution to a state and national federation, the Farm Bureau began to use professional organizers at the state and national level turning attention and energy “from education to legislative and business activities in many states,” with these being its “legitimate and primary functions.”<sup>178</sup> Because of this shift, the relationship between Extension and the Farm Bureau changed. Rather than being an “Extension-dominated organization, the Farm Bureau henceforth

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<sup>175</sup> Campbell, *The Farm Bureau and the New Deal*, 5; Baker, *The County Agent*, 16.

<sup>176</sup> Kile, *The Farm Bureau through Three Decades*, 32; Baker, *The County Agent*, 17-18; Kile, *The Farm Bureau Movement*, 113.

<sup>177</sup> Baker, *The County Agent*, 19; Block, *The Separation of the Farm Bureau and the Extension Service*, 10.

<sup>178</sup> Baker, *The County Agent*, 19; Campbell, *The Farm Bureau and the New Deal*, 7. Campbell begins her book this way: “One of the phenomena of twentieth-century American history is the genesis of the Farm Bureau as a crusading educational agency, and its evolution in less than a quarter of a century into an extraordinarily influential force in the political arena.”

achieved a greater independence and in some cases actually dominated the county agents.”<sup>179</sup> The Farm Bureau was increasingly more interested in lobbying on behalf of agricultural interests rather than supporting educational programs for farmers.

### *Adjusting Agriculture, Part 2*

Returning, then, to the day after Agricultural Administrative Act was signed into law, Wallace’s first speech in this new era makes sense given his background and his desire to approach agricultural problems in a more nuanced, philosophical, and reflective way. The title of the speech was “A Declaration of Interdependence.” He spoke about the desperate situation facing farmers as well as the many urban dwellers who, without options in the cities, turned to abandoned farms with the hope they might make some future for themselves. At this point in time, there were some thirty-two million people on the farms in the United States, “the greatest number ever recorded in our history.”<sup>180</sup> What needed to occur, according to Wallace, was a change in mindset:

“[there needed to be a] mental adjustment, a willing reversal, of driving, pioneer opportunism and ungoverned *laissez-faire*. The ungoverned push of rugged individualism perhaps had an economic justification in the days when we had all the West to surge upon and conquer; but this country has filled up now, and grown up. There are no more Indians to fight. No more land worth taking may be had for the grabbing. We must experience a change of mind and heart. The frontiers that challenge us now are of the mind and spirit.... Above all, we must blaze new trails in the direction of a controlled economy, common sense, and social decency.”<sup>181</sup>

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<sup>179</sup> ———, *The Farm Bureau and the New Deal*, 7.

<sup>180</sup> Henry A. Wallace, *Democracy Reborn: Selected from Public Papers and Edited with an Introduction and Notes by Russell Lord* (New York: Reynal & Hitchcock, 1944), 44. On the “back to the land” movement, see William Edward Bennett, “The Concept of Community: A Study of the Communitarian Programs of the New Deal” (PhD Dissertation, University of Southern Mississippi, 1983).

<sup>181</sup> Wallace, *Democracy Reborn: Selected from Public Papers and Edited with an Introduction and Notes by Russell Lord*, 45-46.

Wallace would more fully articulate his views the next year with the publication of *New Frontiers*. Here he would continue to write about the frontier theme and the necessity for the success of the New Deal to be based on the degree to which “communities are fundamentally permeated with the spirit of the new pioneers not only in a sentimental, but also in a hardboiled, hard-thinking way.” Citizens needed to look beyond short-term profits and instead focus on long-term prospects, as difficult as that seemed to be.<sup>182</sup> America’s development was no longer able to rely on opportunities in Westward expansion and unconstrained freedom to do whatever was desired. Problems had to be dealt with instead of looking just beyond the horizon for another way forward.<sup>183</sup>

By the time the Act was passed, forty million acres had been planted in cotton. The unsold cotton in the United States already exceeded the total average world consumption of American cotton.<sup>184</sup> With the desire not to have yet another year further diminish the price of crops, something needed to be done. There was, according to Schlesinger, one hope. It was essential for the AAA to quickly engage farmers in rural communities. With the AAA being a “confusion of desks, telephones, people and conferences...obviously in no state to undertake a campaign of mass education,” another approach was necessary.<sup>185</sup>

Because the Act was such a different approach to dealing with agricultural production issues, those in administrative positions realized the necessity for “very

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<sup>182</sup> ———, *New Frontiers* (New York: Reynal & Hitchcock, 1934), 282.

<sup>183</sup> The image of the frontier is based on Frederick Jackson Turner’s seminal scholarship. See Frederick Jackson Turner, *The Frontier in American History* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1920).

<sup>184</sup> Badger, *The New Deal*, 153.

<sup>185</sup> Schlesinger, *The Coming of the New Deal*, 59.

far-reaching propagandic campaigns to familiarize farmers with the need for such a program, and the underlying economic facts upon which it was based.”<sup>186</sup> While farmers helped to elect Roosevelt and the New Deal administration, they still had concerns about the expanding role of the federal government.<sup>187</sup> There were even concerns from champions of the new Act. While the AAA was being set up, O’Neal attended a cabinet conference at the White House regarding the administration of the Act and “vigorously opposed a plan to set up a highly centralized bureaucracy.”<sup>188</sup> He insisted that the existing structure of the Extension system be utilized. Rather than creating an entirely new administrative structure with its large number of newly hired bureaucrats, Secretary Wallace had a different idea—one that aligned with O’Neal’s idea for Extension.

Wallace turned to the Extension Service of the land-grant colleges and universities.<sup>189</sup> According to Schlesinger’s account, Extension had trained field

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<sup>186</sup> H. J. C. Umberger, "The Relationship of the Land-Grant Colleges to the A.A.A. Programs," in *Proceedings of the Forty-Eighth Annual Convention of the Association of Land-Grant Colleges and Universities, Washington, DC, November 19-24, 1934*, ed. Charles A. McCue (Wilmington, DE: Cann Brothers, 1935), 106.

<sup>187</sup> Richard S. Kirkendall stresses the apprehension of farmers to participate in AAA programs and how they were eventually “forced to do so” because of the severe drought of 1934. See Richard S. Kirkendall, "The New Deal for Agriculture: Recent Writings, 1971-76," in *Farmers, Bureaucrats, and Middlemen: Historical Perspectives on American Agriculture*, ed. Trudy Huskamp Peterson (Washington, DC: Howard University Press, 1980), 300.

<sup>188</sup> Kile, *The Farm Bureau through Three Decades*, 203. A critical assessment of the AAA and its relationship with traditional powers in agriculture comes from Ingolf Vogeler. He writes, “The initial plan was for the Agricultural Administration Agency (AAA), which administered the act, to be a strong central agency to counter the strong political and economic clout of wealthy farmers at the local level. But the conservative, proagribusiness Farm Bureau, through its governmental contacts, had the AAA’s power decentralized to the county extension service level. The Farm Bureau’s unique relation to the extension service allows it to benefit from this massive new decentralized government program.” See Ingolf Vogeler, *The Myth of the Family Farm: Agribusiness Dominance of U.S. Agriculture* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1981), 270.

<sup>189</sup> For an account of the tensions within the land-grant and cooperative extension system in relation to the creation of the AAA and its utilization of county extension agents, see J. A. Evans, *Recollections of Extension History*, Extension Circular Number 224 (Washington, DC: United States Department of Agriculture, 1938).

personnel who were “charged with bringing the farmers information on improved agricultural techniques. The county agents knew the local problems; they had the confidence of the local people. Would this not be the ideal field staff for AAA?”

Wilson proposed that the State Extension Directors be made the AAA administrators for each state, respectively. This approach was because of his “passion for grass-roots participation.”<sup>190</sup> The Extension system was an institution deeply embedded in rural communities. As C. B. Smith and M. C. Wilson wrote in their 1930 study of the Extension system in the United States, Extension was a “new leaven at work in rural America...bringing rural people together in groups for social intercourse and study, solving community and neighborhood problems, fostering better relations and common endeavor between town and country...broadening the vision of rural men and women.”<sup>191</sup> However, the positive views of Wallace and M. L. Wilson were not without opposition.

Rexford Tugwell, an agricultural economist from Columbia University at the center of animating Roosevelt’s vision for the country, challenged this suggestion about Extension playing such a role. This was out of concern that the Extension Service was too closely aligned with commercial farming and the Farm Bureau.<sup>192</sup>

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<sup>190</sup> Schlesinger, *The Coming of the New Deal*, 60.

<sup>191</sup> C. B. Smith and M. C. Wilson, *The Agricultural Extension System of the United States* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1930), 1.

<sup>192</sup> This theme has been picked up by Jess Gilbert who has written, “In the 1930s, the Farm Bureau/Extension relationship precluded the development of alternative structures for implementing the Agricultural Adjustment Act—structures that might have been more responsive to popular demands.... In summary, the USDA/land-grant complex developed in a way that increased the class-capacity of the dominant farm classes, subverted that of oppositional groups, and structurally privileged the former within the state.” Jess Gilbert and Carolyn Howell, “Beyond ‘State Vs. Society’: Theories of the State and New Deal Agricultural Policies,” *American Sociological Review* 56, no. 2 (1991): 208. On the parallel development of the extension service and Farm Bureau, see Block, *The Separation of the Farm Bureau and the Extension Service*, 4-21. In his dissertation on adult education in the 1930s, Ronald J. Hilton wrote about Tugwell’s resistance to extension because of its relationship with big farming and

While this view was true in many ways, the need for swift action helped Wallace make the decision to endorse Wilson's plan to use Extension as the fieldworkers of the AAA in rural communities.<sup>193</sup> To quote Russell Lord, "Wilson was strong for using the extension services. Quietly and firmly he worked against an impatient impulse in Washington to set up a hasty new field adjustment force on the side. Tugwell had no firsthand knowledge of county agents and little faith in the extension mechanism."<sup>194</sup>

If Tugwell had more experience with Extension, he may have been able to see beyond the Extension/Farm Bureau relationship. But from his point of view, he saw an educational organization too closely aligned with private interests to accomplish the AAA's work. Van L. Perkins' assessment was more practical: turning to the Extension Service was the only possibility.<sup>195</sup> More recently, Christopher P. Loss has shed more light on this episode: "By activating local interests and minimizing the visible presence of the federal government, Wallace and the AAA achieved administrative capacity and a critical mass of built-in rural support while expending minimal political capital."<sup>196</sup> Each of these perspectives points to one reality: on multiple fronts, Extension was the best choice for implementing the AAA, even if it was not ideal to critics.

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how this issue was "never mentioned in most histories of adult education." See Hilton, "The Short Happy Life of a Learning Society: Adult Education in America, 1930-39", 152-153.

<sup>193</sup> Schlesinger, *The Coming of the New Deal*, 60; Chester Charles Davis, "The Extension Service and the A.A.A.," in *Proceedings of the Forty-Eighth Annual Convention of the Association of Land-Grant Colleges and Universities, Washington, DC, November 19-24, 1934*, ed. Charles A. McCue (Wilmington, DE: Cann Brothers, 1935). A result of this decision was increased influence and strength for the Farm Bureau. Cf. Grant McConnell, *The Decline of Agrarian Democracy* (New York: Atheneum, 1953), 77.

<sup>194</sup> Lord, *The Agrarian Revival*, 161.

<sup>195</sup> Perkins, *Crisis in Agriculture*, 97.

<sup>196</sup> Loss, *Between Citizens and the State*, 62. See also ———, "The Land-Grant Colleges, Cooperative Extension, and the New Deal," in *The Land-Grant Colleges and the Reshaping of American Higher Education*, ed. Roger L. Geiger and Nathan M. Sorber (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 2013).

Wallace approached C. W. Warburton, director of Extension, about the idea of utilizing Extension as the vehicle for implementing the AAA's program. Warburton was more than willing to participate, but state Extension systems were reluctant to go along unless they could control the program.<sup>197</sup> Additionally, there was a feeling among county agents that a reduction program could not function effectively because it contradicted "all their previous training and teachings" geared towards increased production and efficiency.<sup>198</sup> Later that year Wallace spoke to the annual convention of the Association of Land-Grant Colleges and Universities. He challenged the administrators of these institutions by saying how they must, "be prepared to go beyond technical agriculture and engineering and even economics into a new realm which none of us yet fully senses."<sup>199</sup> Land-grant institutions and Extension were going to need to adjust to the needs of the country, moving beyond their technical knowledge with skills to a new role in coordinating a completely new program.

The country faced an emergency situation and Extension was utilized to assist or, in some situations, to almost take over the administration of the AAA. Extension agents were present in most, but not all, counties. In larger counties, a single Extension agent was not enough to manage the sheer responsibility of the AAA work. The partnership between the AAA and Extension enabled assistant agents to be employed through federal funds and while the AAA's work and its administration took away from regular Extension work, the attitude of most of the land-grant colleges

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<sup>197</sup> Perkins, *Crisis in Agriculture*, 97.

<sup>198</sup> Evans, *Recollections of Extension History*, 41.

<sup>199</sup> Henry A. Wallace, "Agricultural Planning and the New Deal," in *Proceedings of the Forty-Seventh Annual Convention of the Association of Land-Grant Colleges and Universities, Chicago, Illinois, November 13-15, 1933*, ed. Charles A. McCue (Burlington, VT: Free Press Printing Company, 1934), 42.



was that this was a very serious emergency and “many things in the educational field could stand aside a year or so until agricultural conditions improved.” This refocusing of energy and resources was, in Wilson’s words, something that gave Extension work “quite a shot in the arm.”<sup>200</sup> Infusing new Extension agents would both build up the role of Extension in rural communities while also contribute to the tension between Extension and the administration of the AAA.<sup>201</sup>

The idea of paying farmers not to farm or raise livestock was an odd proposition. But as the Agricultural Adjustment Act had stated, the Secretary of Agriculture had discretion to choose from a number of alternative policies. Aside from entering into agreements with farmers and to pay them to reduce their acreage, Wallace was able to also negotiate marketing agreements by which producers would pay farmers a minimum price for their produce in addition to other steps. All of this was done to raise farm income to what was called “parity.” That is “to establish the same relationship between the prices farmers paid and the prices they received as existed in the so-called golden age of American agriculture between 1909 and 1914.”<sup>202</sup> But the path to achieving parity was fraught with undesirable decisions.

One of the lasting impressions on the American mind about the severe nature of this period was the slaughter of thousands of pigs. The price for pork was so low that Wallace called it “absolutely ruinous” and the Department took steps to help the

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<sup>200</sup> Wilson, “Reminiscences of Milburn Lincoln Wilson,” 1845-1846.

<sup>201</sup> An example of this tension can be found in Henry C. Dethloff, “Missouri Farmers and the New Deal: A Case Study of Farm Policy Formulation on the Local Level,” *Agricultural History* 39, no. 3 (1965). Perkins also identified this tension and stressed that the emergency status of the AAA necessitated its alliance with extension, but this “lingers on long after the need had ended and created almost as many problems as it had solved.” See Perkins, *Crisis in Agriculture*, 98.

<sup>202</sup> Badger, *The New Deal*, 152.

market.<sup>203</sup> In the end, the AAA purchased and slaughtered 6 million piglets in addition to 8.5 million pigs eventually being killed. But whether one was thinking about pigs or wheat, the idea of destroying food during a time when so many lacked adequate nourishment was difficult to accept.<sup>204</sup> Wallace would later write, “to have to destroy a growing crop is a shocking commentary on our civilization. I could tolerate it only as a cleaning up of the wreckage from the old days of unbalanced production. Certainly none of us ever want to go through a plow-up campaign again, no matter how successful a price-raising method it proved to be.”<sup>205</sup>

The AAA was established as an emergency agency responding to an immediate need. Wallace’s reflection suggests how some of the actions taken during this early period of the New Deal showed the extreme steps taken to address agricultural issues through whatever means possible at the time. These steps contributed to the sometimes-tense relationship between the AAA and Extension.

### ***Democratic Participation with Tensions Behind the Scenes***

Extension, as a partner with the AAA, utilized its network of county agents to work with farmers to help them meet the requirements for participation in the domestic allotment program. But the AAA efforts also provided an opportunity to bring farm men and women together around issues of local and national importance and to encourage them to view themselves not only as producers. Chester C. Davis, administrator of the Agricultural Adjustment Act, wrote in 1934 a publication entitled

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<sup>203</sup> Wallace, "Reminiscences of Henry Agard Wallace," 263.

<sup>204</sup> Badger, *The New Deal*, 153; Kile, *The Farm Bureau through Three Decades*, 207-208; Leuchtenburg, *Franklin D. Roosevelt and the New Deal*, 72-73; Roth, *The Great Depression*, 163. It should be noted that pork was given to those in need, but only a minuscule amount because most could not be salvaged for human consumption.

<sup>205</sup> Wallace, *New Frontiers*, 174-175.

*The Farmers Run Their Show* about the ways farmers had gathered together in their communities, especially in response to the severe drought many across the country were experiencing, and to make sense of what was occurring. He wrote:

“Out over the United States, in thousands of farm communities, an evolution of far-reaching importance is taking place, as farmers by the millions organize to take advantage of the opportunities created through the Agricultural Adjustment Act. The question is: Can the old-fashioned democratic processes be successfully used by the farmers to bring order out of economic chaos? The outcome of this experiment, if successful, may give part of the answer to the Twentieth Century riddle—how to preserve democracy in the machine age.”<sup>206</sup>

The AAA was an experiment that confronted the belief that farmers typically only focused on their own individual concerns. Davis continued: “Unquestionably, millions of farmers, accustomed to going their own way and disregarding their fellows, are giving up their old-style individualism. They are learning the central truth of the New Deal philosophy—that the welfare of the individual is dependent on the welfare of the group.” Not only were they learning this philosophy, but they also were putting it into practice. Such a shift did not go unnoticed for those within the AAA who viewed it as something “significant and of permanent social value.” Farmers, in Davis’ view, were not as aware of this simply because they had their backs “to the wall and [were] fighting desperately for the simple right to make a livelihood from the soil.” Even in this challenging and stressful environment, by working together and “organizing along democratic lines, they [could] bring law and order into the economic realm.” Evoking President Abraham Lincoln’s famous address at Gettysburg, Davis wrote about

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<sup>206</sup> Chester Charles Davis, *The Farmers Run Their Show* (Washington, DC: United States Government Printing Office, 1934), 1.

farmers working together as being “For the Farmers, By the Farmers, and Of the Farmers.”<sup>207</sup>

In an article about an Institute of Rural Economics in New Jersey organized by Rutgers University and American Association for Adult Education with the endorsement of Wallace, Elsie Gray Cambridge referenced Wallace’s belief that citizens needed to come together to envision their future and, quoting Wallace, noted how the outlines of long-term planning “can not fully appear until there has been a much more extended debate in the community forums of the cities, the schoolhouses, meetings of the country, the radio, and the press.” Wallace hoped that discussion and debate would “rage with great intensity” that winter of 1934; it would in some locations.<sup>208</sup>

Wallace would later argue that the welfare of the individual was intimately connected with the general welfare and that it was one the central elements of what he called the “democratic body of faith.”<sup>209</sup> This shift away from individualism towards greater collaboration was a strong rebuke to one of the central meta-narratives about the American experience. Wilson expressed similar sentiments. In the American Country Life Association’s publication *Rural America*, he wrote that any planning in the field of agriculture must be done “by and through the democratic participation of the millions of farm families throughout the United States.” He continued by noting how individual farm families needed to do their own thinking but engage others

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<sup>207</sup> Ibid., 2, 3.

<sup>208</sup> Elsie Gray Cambridge, "Farmers' Forums," *Journal of Adult Education* 6, no. 2 (1934): 181.

<sup>209</sup> Wallace, *Democracy Reborn: Selected from Public Papers and Edited with an Introduction and Notes by Russell Lord*, 141.

through various “avenues for collective expression.”<sup>210</sup> Men and women were encouraged to come together to learn from and with one another so they could take action to ameliorate the challenges facing rural America.

In many counties, participation in the AAA’s work was more than 90 percent. Those in the remaining 10 percent often were tenant farmers, farmers on poor land who were barely subsisting, farmers who would like to participate but were unable to do so, and those who viewed such government intervention as something they objected to because of the restrictions placed on them. Overall, however, the adjustment programs helped to restore the “old spirit of neighborliness.” They aided farmers in becoming more aware of the larger social problems at the national and international levels which had repercussions for them at the local level. The county-level production control associations of the AAA, according to Davis, connected deeply to American traditions. He wrote, “in the long view of history, [these associations may] be comparable to the democratic institutions set up by the early American colonists.”<sup>211</sup>

Wallace, in his 1934 book *New Frontiers*, expressed support for the operations of the township and county associations as opportunities for citizens to discuss problems together and to make decisions on matters affecting them. He noted that “too much of the news about the AAA has, it seems to me, centered, by force of habit, upon Washington.”<sup>212</sup> Working with Extension agents, citizens were encouraged to learn

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<sup>210</sup> M. L. Wilson, “Planning Agriculture in Relation to Industry,” *Rural America* 12, no. 9 (1934): 3.

<sup>211</sup> Davis, *The Farmers Run Their Show*, 8, 10, 13.

<sup>212</sup> Wallace, *New Frontiers*, 265. In his recollections of this period, M. L. Wilson expressed his support for Wallace’s statement that teaching democratic behavior in agriculture through the implementation of

from and work alongside their neighbors to improve both their individual and collective standing through action. Wallace and Wilson both supported an administrative structure that was more democratic and this approach aligned with that vision. “At its best,” Perkins wrote about the AAA, “it was thoroughly democratic, being organized from the bottom up.”<sup>213</sup>

While farmers were gaining more opportunities to engage their neighbors about the issues they faced collectively, the two organizations convening them—AAA and Extension—were dealing with their own challenges. Speaking at the annual meeting of the Association of Land-Grant Colleges and Universities in November of 1934, Davis expressed appreciation for the tremendous job Extension did in responding to the urgent needs brought about by the AAA’s role in the Roosevelt administration’s vision for correcting America’s course. Extension had responded to two national emergencies: World War I and then the second national emergency that occurred because of the economic depression. Speaking to their current challenges, Davis noted how it was also a time to shape policies for the future.

Asking others to think about the future of the AAA and Extension’s role, Davis raised a concerning question: “Are we moving in the direction of making the county agent only an administrative agent and dropping his educational identity? If so, is this desirable?” Expressing concern that Extension agents had been taken away from their regular duties, Davis posed additional questions: “What is the real function of the extension service? Is it to teach technical problems of agricultural production? Is it to

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AAA committees and its organization was an important role for the government to play. See Wilson, “Reminiscences of Milburn Lincoln Wilson,” 1622.

<sup>213</sup> Perkins, *Crisis in Agriculture*, 98.

serve in the broader field for a better agriculture?" At the end of his presentation, he suggested that both the AAA and Extension devote themselves to a thorough educational program which would "lay out clearly and vigorously the fundamentals of production adjustment."<sup>214</sup> But for Extension agents who were "accustomed to parceling out a continuous supply of 'right answers,'" defining what "education" meant was just as important as the suggestion that education should be the centerpiece of their work.<sup>215</sup>

Following Davis' presentation, H. J. C. Umberger, director of Extension at Kansas State College of Agricultural and Applied Science, spoke. He noted that since the relationship between the AAA and land-grant colleges was only experimental, it was inadvisable to regard its relationship as final and solidified. Additionally, he expressed concern the Agricultural Adjustment Act imposed "certain responsibilities which cannot, even with the most liberal classification, be termed educational." To him, land-grant colleges and Extension needed to maintain a focus on work that was primarily educational. The AAA had blurred institutional roles by having these institutions engaged in work that resembled programs in production or marketing. Umberger's concerns about this blurring would seemingly be reinforced with further government action.<sup>216</sup>

That year, when the Kerr Tobacco and Banhead Cotton bills were passed, the AAA had the responsibility of administering penalties against farmers. Because of this, Extension's educational tradition was increasingly uneasy with its role. Wayne D.

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<sup>214</sup> Davis, "The Extension Service and the A.A.A.," 169, 170.

<sup>215</sup> Baker, *The County Agent*, 85.

<sup>216</sup> Umberger, "The Relationship of the Land-Grant Colleges to the A.A.A. Programs," 108.

Rasmussen and Gladys L. Baker captured this sentiment in their study of the USDA: “The agricultural adjustment program transformed the Department from a research and educational institution into an action agency that directly assisted and regulated American farming.”<sup>217</sup> Charles M. Hardin also identified this reality: “Extension had always developed programs cooperatively and with great decentralization,” he acknowledged, “but to discharge national programs involving the strict counting of large sums distributed to farmers in return for specific performance on the farmers’ part was another matter.”<sup>218</sup>

In 1935, maybe realizing some of these tensions, Wallace wrote to county agents telling them they should, “look with pride on the part you have played in helping farmers meet the problems of the past year. The success of the various emergency activities alone are evidence of your ability to acquaint famers with the provisions of the programs, to help them organize, and to assist them in administering their affairs.” He closed the message by writing, “All of us know the progress made by agriculture during the past 18 months [and we] commend all of you county agents for the part you played in the program.”<sup>219</sup> But their educational work was at a standstill. Years later Wilson would acknowledge the alteration of Extension’s work: “The County Agent came close to being, in many cases, the executive officer for the Triple-A committee.”<sup>220</sup> The emergency status that land-grant colleges, Extension, and even many within the USDA saw with the urgency and actions of the AAA were continuing

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<sup>217</sup> Rasmussen and Baker, *The Department of Agriculture*, 27.

<sup>218</sup> Hardin, *The Politics of Agrilculture: Soil Conservation and the Struggle for Power in Rural America*, 133.

<sup>219</sup> Henry A. Wallace, "A Message to All County Agents," *Extension Service Review* 6, no. 7 (1935):

n.p.

<sup>220</sup> Wilson, "Reminiscences of Milburn Lincoln Wilson," 2001.



into the future with an uncertain end. But education would come to play an important role in the USDA's work, particularly through civic adult education as administrators built on this period's efforts to convene farmers to discuss public problems.

### ***Planning and the Emergence of Education in the AAA***

M. L. Wilson had been appointed the Assistant Secretary of the USDA in 1934. Part of his responsibility was to develop several educational programs.<sup>221</sup> Reflecting on his experiences decades later, Wilson spoke about the time period between the summer of 1934 and the spring of 1935 as a "significant period for the administration of Henry A. Wallace." The AAA's production programs had started the previous year and the checks to farmers for reductions in production were mailed that December. Broadly speaking, there was a sense of accomplishment for the recovery program as a whole; in Wilson's words, there was a "reasonable degree of harmony" and "relatively little partisanship" simply because the Republican Party was so weak.<sup>222</sup> If there was a time to push forward with their vision for the USDA, this was it.

In 1933 and early 1934 Wallace wrote *New Frontiers* and likened the United States to an eighteen year old. The country was "possessed of excellent health and a strong body, but so unsettled in his mind and feelings that he doesn't know what to do next." Wallace went on to write that the "tragic joke" on the United States was that "we went to bed a pioneer debtor nation in 1914 and woke up after a nightmare of world madness as a presumably mature creditor nation in 1920. We were full grown in the same sense that a boy of eighteen is full grown. But ever since 1920 that boy of

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<sup>221</sup> Lachman, "Democratic Ideology and Agricultural Policy "Program Study and Discussion" in the U.S. Department of Agriculture, 1934-1946", 19.

<sup>222</sup> Wilson, "Reminiscences of Milburn Lincoln Wilson," 1615.

eighteen has been playing in the sand pile.”<sup>223</sup> To Wallace, the United States was thrust into a new role and it had not yet defined a way forward.<sup>224</sup>

*New Frontiers*, for Wilson, was a reflection of Wallace’s thinking during the spring and summer of 1934.<sup>225</sup> Using imagery and language evoking a great transition, Wallace observed, “What we approach is not a new continent but a new state of heart and mind resulting in new standards of accomplishment.” He challenged his readers to “invent, build and put to work new social machinery.” To do this work and move into what he called the land of the cooperative good life, citizens needed to “examine all of [their] institutions, traditions, and habits of mind without fear or prejudice, and see to what extent changes should be made.”<sup>226</sup> Wallace’s vision for a democratic society was rooted in the idea that people need to understand issues and work together to realize the possibilities before them. Cooperation could only come from honest assessments about what was and what could be.

In May of 1934, Wallace wrote a short essay called “Let Us Open the Doors!” in which he expressed concern the “social machines set up by this administration will break down unless they are inspired by men who in their hearts catch a larger vision than the hard-driving profit motives of the past.” Citizens needed to “change their

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<sup>223</sup> Wallace, *New Frontiers*, 3, 4-5.

<sup>224</sup> One scholar has written that, for Wallace, “The closing of the frontier meant...that the very conditions which provided the material basis for the competitive tradition had ceased to exist. It meant, along with the rise of large corporate enterprise and America’s transformation into a creditor nation, that *laissez-faire* policies had become obsolete and that the nation had developed a ‘mature economy.’” Theodore Rosenof, “The Economic Ideas of Henry A. Wallace, 1933-1948,” *Agricultural History* 41, no. 2 (1967): 144.

<sup>225</sup> Wilson, “Reminiscences of Milburn Lincoln Wilson,” 1620-1621.

<sup>226</sup> Wallace, *New Frontiers*, 11. Wilson shared Wallace’s passion for new possibilities and opportunities. In his comments from a symposium held in his honor at Montana State University many years later in 1966, Wilson expressed his fascination with frontiers of all types—geographical, theoretical, operational, etc. See M. L. Wilson, “Informal Comments,” in *Agricultural Statesmen: Proceedings of the M.L. Wilson Symposium, July 25-27, 1966*, ed. Roy E. Huffman (Bozeman, MT: Big Sky Books, 1977), 205.

attitude” concerning the nature of both humanity and society to develop a capacity “to envision a cooperative objective and be willing to pay the price to attain it.”<sup>227</sup>

But for him, there was an even more important step: “[citizens] must have the intelligence and the will power to turn down simple solutions appealing to the short-term selfish motives of a particular class.” The purpose of the New Deal, as he expressed it in the American Country Life Association’s publication, was to revive “the feeling of mutual obligation and neighborliness which marked our early pioneer settlements, and to make that spirit effective throughout the modern interdependent community, the Nation as a whole.” To do so required that citizens take up the questions most challenging to society and to find ways to address problems in a cooperative way. The issues facing the country—and the world—could not be addressed behind closed doors. It was time to open the doors and “debate our future course throughout the length and breadth of the land.”<sup>228</sup>

While the existing county associations associated with the AAA’s allotment program helped to create opportunities for citizens to discuss and deliberate important topics, some envisioned more. According to Wilson, many of the people in the AAA “had a rather simple reaction” to the problem of adjustments and the goal of getting prices up to parity and keeping them there. He would later note how many people at this time thought of parity “in simple terms, instead of in the complicated complex

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<sup>227</sup> Henry A. Wallace, “Let Us Open the Doors!,” *Rural America* 12, no. 5 (1934): 2.

<sup>228</sup> Ibid. This was a theme that Wallace would echo in a widely published pamphlet touching on similar topics. See ———, *America Must Choose: The Advantages and Disadvantages of Nationalism, of World Trade, and of a Planned Middle Course* (New York; Boston: Foreign Policy Association; World Peace Foundation, 1934). We must be critical of Wallace here, however, because his reference to “debate” does not align with the notion of addressing problems in a “cooperative” way. Even for someone championing this work such as Wallace, there were still tensions about what discussion and cooperation really meant.

problems arising in an economy such as ours.”<sup>229</sup> Too few individuals were concerning themselves with the interconnectedness of agriculture and society, between the loss of fertile soil and the impact that had on the lives of all Americans.<sup>230</sup>

Planning was continuing to play an important role in the development of USDA action programs, especially since Department administrators had genuine “democratic aspirations.”<sup>231</sup> But such aspirations did not align well with what some scholars have identified as a “national heritage of antagonism to planning.” Farmers, as well as the broader population, needed assurances “not only that planning [was] compatible with democracy, but that democracy [could not] be preserved without planning.” The work of the early New Deal relief and recovery programs offered initial opportunities for those concerned about agriculture in the long-term to have a chance with a hesitant American public to show the possibilities of what could happen if experts and citizens worked together.<sup>232</sup>

Speaking at the annual meeting of the Association of Land-Grant Colleges and Universities, H. R. Tolley, head of the AAA Program Planning Division, noted how the country was making “consciously-planned efforts toward economic recovery.” He sought to clarify what he meant by such a statement: “There is nothing mysterious

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<sup>229</sup> Wilson, “Reminiscences of Milburn Lincoln Wilson,” 1814.

<sup>230</sup> On the connection of the depletion of soil and the crisis facing Americans during this period, see Randal S. Beeman and James A. Pritchard, *A Green and Permanent Land: Ecology and Agriculture in the Twentieth Century* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2001), 9-34.

<sup>231</sup> M. L. Wilson and H. R. Tolley, “Some Future Problems of Agricultural Adjustment,” *Discussion Statement No. 14, December 1934, Material Suggested for Use in the Developing Discussion of Problems of Agricultural Adjustment* (1934), 2.

<sup>232</sup> Beeman and Pritchard, *A Green and Permanent Land*, 24, 28; Henry A. Wallace, “Land-Grant Institutions and Agricultural Readjustments,” in *Proceedings of the Forty-Eighth Annual Convention of the Association of Land-Grant Colleges and Universities, Washington, DC, November 19-24, 1934*, ed. Charles A. McCue (Wilmington, DE: Cann Brothers, 1935), 44. For many, planning was closely identified with the Soviet Union’s “encompassing Five-Year Plans” and with the corporatism of Italian Fascism. See Katznelson, *Fear Itself*, 235.

about the word. 'Planning' simply means trying to see where we want to go, and then trying to find the best means of getting there." Planning in democracy remained rooted in the core belief that citizens had agency to choose their leaders and to pass judgment on political decisions. "...If they are not satisfied with the plans," Tolley emphasized, "the people can turn down both plans and leaders."<sup>233</sup> Nevertheless, the great majority of the newer agencies were administered from the top down. Even though the urgency of 1933 had passed, the "emergency nature of the new programs caused disproportionate emphasis" on time requirements and immediate results in the following years.<sup>234</sup>

Many of the features of the AAA troubled USDA administrators because of the "little attention [paid] to the regional and individual differences and [because it] did not allow the colleges and the farmers to contribute as much as they could to the planning of programs." Planning, in these cases, demonstrated the centralized power of the federal government. But concerns about the crises facing rural Americans were so great and pervasive that one's reticence toward planning was assuaged by the possibility of some level of improvement.<sup>235</sup>

Partially as a response to concerns that too much was coming out of Washington, the county agricultural planning project took shape during 1935.<sup>236</sup> Tolley, Wallace, and Wilson arranged four regional adjustment conferences for early March of that year. Department and college officials attended these conferences in

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<sup>233</sup> H. R. Tolley, "Agricultural Planning in a Democracy," in *Proceedings of the Forty-Eighth Annual Convention of the Association of Land-Grant Colleges and Universities, Washington, DC, November 19-24, 1934*, ed. Charles A. McCue (Wilmington, DE: Cann Brothers, 1935), 60.

<sup>234</sup> B. L. Hummel, "Democratic Control in County Planning," *Rural America* 16, no. 8 (1938): 3, 4.

<sup>235</sup> Beeman and Pritchard, *A Green and Permanent Land*, 25.

<sup>236</sup> A brief introduction to this early agricultural planning work is found in Tolley, "Agricultural Planning in a Democracy."

order to focus on the rearing of the AAA rather than dwell on the fact that it did not come into the world “the perfect child.”<sup>237</sup>

Tolley and Wilson represented the USDA while directors of Extension and the Experiment Stations, in addition to agricultural economists, represented the land-grant institutions.<sup>238</sup> To help with the transition from the emergency to a long-term agricultural planning program, there needed to be a cooperative relationship among the USDA, land-grant colleges, and Extension. Wilson spoke about the relationships among these institutions as being built on a “tradition rich in cooperative endeavor.”<sup>239</sup>

For the next six months the Planning Division of the AAA, colleges, and BAE, also within the USDA, worked together. Wallace’s reflection was this: “We were at last approaching the [agricultural] problem in the way we would have liked to approach it in 1933....” During summer meetings, questions were raised about issues related to research and planning, administration, interstate cooperative, education, marketing, and personnel, among other topics. One of the questions under the heading “education” focused on the possibilities of advancing the discussion technique as “an instrument for advancing understanding of fundamental agricultural matters in a way consistent with the principles of democracy.”<sup>240</sup> Administrators such as Wilson and Tolley viewed education as a two-directional endeavor because “the best plans and programs could not be developed by experts alone” and they accordingly sought to institutionalize an approach that countered an expert-driven approach. By the

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<sup>237</sup> M. L. Wilson, “Statement by the Secretary,” M. L. Wilson Collection, 1935-1960, Box 6, File 9, Regional Meetings, Spring 1935, Merrill G. Burlingame Special Collections, Montana State University, 1.

<sup>238</sup> Kirkendall, *Social Scientists and Farm Politics in the Age of Roosevelt*, 136.

<sup>239</sup> Wilson, “Statement by the Secretary,” 1.

<sup>240</sup> na., “Informal Discussion Questions,” M. L. Wilson Collection, 1935-1960, Box 6, File 10, Regional Meetings, Summer 1935, Merrill G. Burlingame Special Collections, Montana State University, 4.

beginning of 1936, every state but California was involved with the program. Wilson called the county committees coming out of this project “the most significant thing in the field of agriculture” that year.<sup>241</sup> The county planning program, which would later transform into the Department’s county land-use planning efforts, was an initiative supported by some within the USDA as an attempt to respond to and address the numerous issues affecting rural communities such as soil depletion and the continued farming on sub-marginal lands.<sup>242</sup>

In addition to the county planning project, the USDA had many other agencies in rural communities. One example from Virginia highlighted the high number of federal agencies working in rural communities and the corresponding confusion about the various roles and responsibilities.<sup>243</sup> What emerged from the various agencies of the USDA, according to B. L. Hummel, was a tension between two “rather distinct Schools of thought.” Hummel wrote:

“One group insisted that public programs can go only as fast and as far as local people are ready to carry them, while the other group believed that all really important decisions and plans must be made by experts and the resulting program sold to the public. Fortunately for those who still believe in the people’s ability to govern themselves, the chief administrators in the Department of Agriculture share this faith in the self-determining principle of American government.”<sup>244</sup>

The complexity of public problems pushed Wilson and a supportive Wallace to take the USDA in a direction that considered the cultural and political implications of their

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<sup>241</sup> Kirkendall, *Social Scientists and Farm Politics in the Age of Roosevelt*, 138, 139, 140.

<sup>242</sup> Baker, *The County Agent*, 86. For a very brief introduction to some of the New Deal farm programs, see Conkin, *A Revolution Down on the Farm: The Transformation of American Agriculture since 1929*, 63-76; Danbom, *Born in the Country*, 206-232.

<sup>243</sup> Hummel, "Democratic Control in County Planning," 3. Hummel notes that in one county in Virginia there were 13 different agencies and organizations dealing with agriculture.

<sup>244</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

work through an educational paradigm distinct from the numerous action programs in existence.

The USDA had a role to play in preserving the land and increasing the economic standing of farm men and women. But for them, it also had a responsibility to provide opportunities for citizens to engage the problems facing their communities. More importantly, they also wanted to create spaces for citizens to learn about and discuss possibilities for responses to the issues they faced. They would look to adult education opportunities as a possible way forward, building on Extension's historical approach to public problems through collaboration with citizens as well as contributing to the broader, developing field of adult education.<sup>245</sup> The next chapter focuses squarely on the role of education as a pillar of the USDA's work.

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<sup>245</sup> Adult education was shifting from a focus on the individual and his or her acquisition of knowledge to becoming something more community-focused and civic. See Joseph F. Kett, *The Pursuit of Knowledge under Difficulties: From Self-Improvement to Adult Education in America, 1750-1990* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1994), 370.



## CHAPTER 3

### THE IDEA OF DISCUSSION

I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?  
– Isaiah 43:19 NRSV

“All real living is meeting.” – Martin Buber<sup>246</sup>

#### *Testing an Idea: The Creation of Discussion Groups*

Until the reorganization of the AAA in 1934, the agency's work was of an entirely emergency character. While there was still a need for action, some breathing room allowed for responding to the immediate needs of farmers while also looking to agriculture's future.<sup>247</sup> “Sooner or later,” director of the Program Planning Division H. R. Tolley noted, long-time planning would be necessary for agriculture. As a response to this need, the Program Planning Division of the AAA was reorganized with an emphasis on a long-term vision for planning.<sup>248</sup> But while the Division sought to “effectuate the policy of the agricultural adjustment act and increase the income of farmers in different regions producing different commodities,” there was an interest for a greater understanding of “the democratic process.”<sup>249</sup>

The two major challenges facing the USDA were both practical and educational: first, the continuous drought facing the Great Plains, and second, the need

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<sup>246</sup> Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, trans. Ronald Gregor Smith, Second ed. (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1958), 11.

<sup>247</sup> Agricultural Adjustment Administration Division of Information, “The Emergency Years, 1933-1934,” *Discussion Statement No. 3, June 20, 1934, Material Suggested for Use in the Developing Discussion of Problems of Agricultural Adjustment*, ed. H. R. Tolley (1934), 1.

<sup>248</sup> H. R. Tolley, “The Program Planning Division of the Agricultural Adjustment Administration,” *Journal of Farm Economics* 16, no. 4 (1934): 582.

<sup>249</sup> *Ibid.*, 590; Wilson, “Reminiscences of Milburn Lincoln Wilson,” 2090.

for the USDA to “educate the public—particularly the farmers—both in the agricultural programs that were underway and in the reforms needed for the future.”<sup>250</sup> In an essay entitled “Enlightened Citizenry” presented at a symposium convened in Wilson’s honor at Montana State University in 1966, Virgil Gilman suggested that he and Tolley “were both deeply concerned that not only farmers but all citizens be fully informed and have full opportunity to express themselves regarding problems and programs.”<sup>251</sup> Education, particularly adult education, had a vital role to play if the USDA was to continue its work in the American countryside. Wilson welcomed the opportunity since he was responsible for the development of education programs within the Department.<sup>252</sup>

Addressing the educational needs of the Department was based on Wilson’s previous work in Montana as an Extension agent. Nearly two decades earlier, Wilson brought farmers together into community discussion groups and he felt something along those lines might be possible again but at a national scale.<sup>253</sup> Discussion, an essential element of democracy as he saw it, was critical because of the complex social and economic issues facing the country. Citizens needed educational opportunities to

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<sup>250</sup> McDean, "M. L. Wilson and Agricultural Reform in Twentieth Century America", 414.

<sup>251</sup> Virgil Gilman, "Enlightened Citizenry - Notes on Process," in *Agricultural Statesmen: Proceedings of the M.L. Wilson Symposium, July 25-27, 1966*, ed. Roy E. Huffman (Bozeman, MT: Big Sky Books, 1977), 28. This essay evoked Thomas Jefferson’s famous phrase: “I know of no safe repository of the ultimate powers of the society but the people themselves; and if we think them not enlightened enough to exercise control with a wholesome discretion, the remedy is not to take it from them, but to inform their discretion by education.” Paul Leicester Ford, ed. *The Works of Thomas Jefferson* (New York: Knickerbocker Press, 1903), 278.

<sup>252</sup> Lachman, "Democratic Ideology and Agricultural Policy "Program Study and Discussion" in the U.S. Department of Agriculture, 1934-1946", 19.

<sup>253</sup> McDean, "M. L. Wilson and Agricultural Reform in Twentieth Century America", 414.

learn about these issues.<sup>254</sup> Organizations such as the Association of Land-Grant Colleges and Universities encouraged the USDA to develop such programs in response to the current needs. Wallace and Wilson had long been interested in such a program, situating themselves as part of a larger movement seeking to utilize discussion as a way to educate citizens about public problems so they could become better informed and engaged. This was their opportunity.

Secretary Wallace called together those within the Department to a “Forum on Forums” in order to look at the possibilities of the use of forums, panels, and group discussion for the its educational work complementing the already-existent action programs such as the AAA. Those in attendance at the first meeting on December 7,

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<sup>254</sup> Discussion, and more broadly adult education, built on a long tradition within the United States. While not the focus of this dissertation, it is important to acknowledge the previous manifestations of adult education that emphasized broad thinking about issues.

The idea of forums had historical precedent through some of the more prominent models of adult education—lyceums, the Chautauqua Institution and subsequent Chautauqua movement, and public lectures—being some of the more common examples. The New England town meeting of the seventeenth century—according to Morse Cartwright, “formed the initial adult education venture” in North America—was often viewed as an ideal embodiment of citizens learning about and discussing with one another the important issues of the day. Often times, the later movements evoked this model and language for engaging communities. In the first *Handbook of Adult Education*, “open forums” were mentioned briefly and a range of forums highlighted the various attempts to help citizens think about and discuss issues. The word *open* emphasized the (then) novel ideal that discussion would not be limited to private clubs or groups and would be open to the general public. See Robert Kunzman and David Tyack, “Educational Forums of the 1930s: An Experiment in Adult Civic Education,” *American Journal of Education* 111, no. 3 (2005): 324; Morse A. Cartwright, *Ten Years of Adult Education: A Report on a Decade of Progress in the American Movement* (New York: Macmillan Company, 1935), 8; Dorothy Rowden, ed. *Handbook of Adult Education in the United States* (New York: American Association for Adult Education, 1934), 63-69; Gastil and Keith, “A Nation That (Sometimes) Likes to Talk,” 10; William M. Keith, *Democracy as Discussion: Civic Education and the American Forum Movement* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2007), 213-240. Open discussion was also present in community development work. Importantly, women played vital roles in this. See Mary Mims and Georgia Williams Moritz, *The Awakening Community* (New York: Macmillan Company, 1932).

For a general introduction to the development of adult education in the United States, see Malcolm S. Knowles, “Historical Development of the Adult Education Movement in the United States,” in *Handbook of Adult Education in the United States*, ed. Malcolm S. Knowles (Chicago: Adult Education Association of the U.S.A., 1960); ———, *The Adult Education Movement in the United States (Includes Adult Education Institutions through 1976)*, Revised ed. (Huntington, NY: Robert E. Krieger Publishing Company, [1962] 1977); Harold W. Stubblefield and Patrick Keane, *Adult Education in the American Experience: From the Colonial Period to the Present* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1994), 135-151.

1934, included staff members from the USDA; John W. Studebaker, Commissioner of Education; and representatives from interested agencies.<sup>255</sup> The initial meeting was completely exploratory with discussion focusing on opportunities for adult education and the possibility that the government might play an active role. There were five or six more gatherings of this type to discuss the role of the USDA in such an endeavor.

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<sup>255</sup> It should be noted that Studebaker helped give life to the forum movement in the 1930s and early 1940s. As an advocate for deliberative forums in urban neighborhoods, he championed group discussion because foundational to “good democratic action” was the capacity to engage “all issues and problems which affect our group life.” His efforts to revive neighborhood discussions, as they were experienced in the Progressive Era, received national press coverage, but financial support was limited. John W. Studebaker, “What I Mean by Public Forums,” The Public and Public Schools, Box 6.04, Readings on John W. Studebaker, Superintendent, 1928-1960, Charles F. Kettering Foundation Archives, Charles F. Kettering Foundation. Frank Ernest Hill, “Back to ‘Town Meetings,’” *New York Times Magazine*, September 15, 1935. Studebaker was the public figure for deliberative forums because of his central role in the development of the Federal Forum Project. Before that, he gained fame because of his work in Des Moines, Iowa. While Superintendent of the Des Moines public schools, he used public schools as sites for forums for citizens to learn about problems and to do so alongside others through discussion.

For his own writing, see John W. Studebaker, *The American Way: Democracy at Work in Des Moines Forums* (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1935); ———, “What I Mean by Public Forums.”; John W. Studebaker and Morse A. Cartwright, *Plain Talk* (Washington, DC: National Home Library Foundation, 1936); John W. Studebaker, “Public Forums: An Evaluation,” *Journal of Adult Education* 9, no. 4 (1937); John W. Studebaker and Chester S. Williams, *Choosing Our Way: The Story of a Forum Program Sponsored by the Office of Education and the Results of a Survey of 431 Forums under Various Sponsorships* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1938); ———, *Forum Planning Handbook: How to Organize School-Administered Forums* (Washington, DC: The American Association for Adult Education; United States Department of the Interior, Office of Education, 1939); John W. Studebaker, “Beacon Lights in a Murky World,” in *Proceedings of the Association of Land-Grant Colleges and Universities: Fifty-Fifth Annual Convension, Chicago, Illinois, November 10-12, 1941*, ed. William L. Slate (New Haven, CT: Quinnipiac Press, 1942). For scholarship on Studebaker and the Federal Forum Project, see Hilton, “The Short Happy Life of a Learning Society: Adult Education in America, 1930-39”, 98-121; Keith, *Democracy as Discussion*, 213-329; Loss, *Between Citizens and the State*, 79-86.

Struggling to gain support at the national level for such a project, Studebaker eventually secured funding to establish 10 federal forum demonstration sites—in cities and counties from Portland, Oregon, to Monongalia County, West Virginia—beginning in 1936. The project established Cooperative Forum Centers and Forum Counseling Programs in partnership with state universities and departments of education. In many ways, the Federal Forum Project replicated the extension system through its use of educators in communities. But as Christopher Loss notes, the forum movement never achieved the status of a “training ground for national citizenship” as had been hoped. Nevertheless, it did encourage an estimated 2.5 million citizens who participated in one of the project’s 23,000 discussion sessions between 1936 and 1941 to think of citizenship as more than voting. As Loss explains further, the forum program was “eventually eclipsed by wartime exigencies and the availability of new mass communications.” *ibid.*, 83, 85.

The outcome of these early meetings was the decision to conduct an experiment in adult education during the winter of late 1934 and early 1935. To lead this effort, Wallace selected M. L. Wilson to oversee a Department Committee on Discussion Groups. Wilson valued the voice of citizens and wanted to elevate the role of group discussion to be “one of the major pillars of national agricultural policy.” He was a logical choice for Wallace.<sup>256</sup> In addition to Wilson, the committee was composed of C. W. Warburton, Director of Federal Extension Work; Alfred Stedman, AAA Director of Information; Milton S. Eisenhower, Director of the USDA Office of Information; and Roy F. Hendrickson, Assistant to Wilson.<sup>257</sup>

This new “pillar” of the national agricultural policy was distinct the other programs. It was the intention of Wilson and Wallace that discussion groups should not be “forums for the dissemination of the U.S.D.A.’s propaganda.” Instead, as Harry McDean notes, group discussion was meant to “provide a means for the expressing of all points of view.”<sup>258</sup> The effort was designed to help local communities obtain information and viewpoints while also testing and challenging positions by having various topics be subjected to group discussion and analysis. This was important because cooperative and democratic processes stood in contrast to the long-established tradition of individualism in agriculture.<sup>259</sup> According to Wilson, the federal

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<sup>256</sup> Gilbert, "Inviting Criticism: The New Deal's Farmer Discussion Groups and Schools of Philosophy for Extension Workers."

<sup>257</sup> *Preliminary Report of the Forum and Discussion Group Project*, 2-3; Lachman, "Democratic Ideology and Agricultural Policy "Program Study and Discussion" in the U.S. Department of Agriculture, 1934-1946", 26.

<sup>258</sup> McDean, "M. L. Wilson and Agricultural Reform in Twentieth Century America", 415.

<sup>259</sup> M. L. Wilson, "Abstract of Address, a Balanced Agriculture for the Future," M. L. Wilson Collection, 1935-1960, Box 6, File 11, Merrill G. Burlingame Special Collections, Montana State University.

government made no attempt to control discussion, but it did have an interest in guaranteeing that the “facts [were] set forth correctly.”<sup>260</sup>

Rather than influencing the outcome of group discussions, the role of the USDA was to prepare guides for discussion methods and outlines for discussion. Wilson noted in an article in the *Extension Service Review* that while the USDA would produce such documents and disseminate them widely, “the handling of the discussion programs [was] entirely up to the States.”<sup>261</sup> In his notes about the objective of discussion groups, Wilson wrote that they were:

“...to create opportunities for farmers to think through for themselves basic problems relating to national agricultural policies which will require decision sometime in the future. The project would be undertaken on the principle that these problems should be discussed and decided consciously with eyes open, and their implications clear rather than in any other way. Democracy has a responsibility of keeping open the channels for the functioning of democracy. The object would not be propaganda, not aimed in the direction of bringing people to any specific or ‘right’ conclusions, but rather through an adult educational process to provide them with means of getting facts,

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<sup>260</sup> ———, “A Theory of Agricultural Democracy,” *Extension Service Circular* 355 1941, 8. Wilson’s phrasing of setting facts correctly fails to acknowledge how “facts” are shaped and determined is not, in fact, set. He glosses over the complicated and value-laden work of deciding what information is presented and how. Looking at the front material from one of the discussion pamphlets that would be used in 1936 and 1937, one is able to see explicitly how the USDA envisioned these topical publications to be used: “This pamphlet is the eighth of the materials prepared for the assistance of rural discussion groups in 1936-37 through the cooperation of the Extension Service and the Agricultural Adjustment Administration of the U. S. Department of Agriculture. It is not intended to direct attention to any particular point of view or conclusion, and no statement contained herein should be construed as an official expression of the Department of Agriculture. The materials listed below attempt to present, in readable, non-technical language, discussions of issues related to rural life. Their contents are not offered as either complete or orderly presentations, but as collections of current facts and attitudes which may be of use to rural people who are thinking about these questions for themselves.” United States Department of Agriculture, “What Part Should Farmers in Your County Take in Making National Agricultural Policy?,” *Farmer Discussion Group Pamphlet* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Agriculture; The Extension Service; Agricultural Adjustment Administration, 1936).

<sup>261</sup> M. L. Wilson, “Farm Folk Talk over National Affairs,” *Extension Service Review* 6, no. 4 (1935): 33. But as one State Leader for Discussion Groups noted, he feared that materials were written, “by degree people for degree people, and over the head of the average local leader.” William F. Johnston, “Monthly Narrative Report of Extension Specialist, State Discussion Group Leader, December 1937,” Cooperative Extension Service Records, Box 2223, Folder 54, University Archives and Historical Collections, Michigan State University.

information and opinions which would assist them in reaching intelligent, considered decisions.”<sup>262</sup>

Wilson was emphatic the USDA would not advocate for anything other than the opportunity for citizens to learn about the issues facing them during this time of transformation. The idea of discussion groups, in this style, had to be sold to land-grant colleges and the Extension Service.<sup>263</sup> He had a long relationship with Extension and immediately saw an opportunity for the Department to partner with Extension agents on this project of cultivating democratic practices among citizens, especially after the county planning efforts made under the auspices of the AAA had demonstrated how rural men and women longed for opportunities to gather with neighbors to understand what was occurring in agriculture.

But the relationship between the USDA and Extension had been somewhat tense since the AAA’s adjustment program had begun in 1933. Both land-grant colleges and Extension felt the USDA bypassed them by establishing their own local offices for the program. With this in the back of his mind, Wilson sent a representative to visit the colleges and universities in December of 1934 in order to assess interest in a project focused on discussion among farmers. The response from university administrators was encouraging. With their support, Wilson invited them to send representatives to Washington. Similarly, on January 18, 1935, Wallace wrote to the administrative heads of ten land-grant colleges, particularly the deans of the colleges

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<sup>262</sup> M. L. Wilson, "National Project Discussion Groups and County Forums on National Agricultural Policy," M. L. Wilson Papers, 1913-1970, Box 57, File 14, Discussion Group Notes, Merrill G. Burlingame Special Collections, Montana State University.

<sup>263</sup> Discussion had long been an element of educational programs in Extension since its origins. However, this program was much more organized around formal structures for discussion. See ———, "Rural America Discusses Democracy," *Public Opinion Quarterly* 5, no. 2 (1941): 290.

of agriculture. He would echo Wilson's interest in discussion groups in his letter. To quote Wallace's letter at length:

"One of the great present day challenges of agriculture is to provide opportunities for farmers and their families to obtain in fields aside from agricultural methods, information and more adequate means of understanding economic and social questions and changes.

"There is an avenue which appears to hold great promise for meeting this need, centering about the development of forums and discussion groups in rural areas. A committee of members of the Department staff has recently given this subject considerable study and has concluded that the discussion method deserves greater encouragement. But it is felt that, while the method is old, more knowledge of discussion techniques and the whole field of their possibilities is highly desirable, warranting experimentation.

"Because of the special interest which I am informed you and members of your staff have in this subject, I am turning to you and the heads of nine other state agricultural colleges with a view of seeking cooperation in carrying on a project in conducting experiments with forums and discussion groups during February and early March.

"Unfortunately, I cannot extend to you the offer of as much financial support as I should like but the project is rather a modest one. It is, nevertheless, highly significant for the reason that from it may be obtained information, particularly a body of knowledge respecting the relative merits of various discussion techniques, which may point to the desirability of the Department undertaking to seek greater financial support for this activity in the future.

"The committee came to the conclusion that in view of the shortness of time available before spring farm work will begin, the project this year, in order to be of the most value to the cooperative institutions, might best be carried on over a period of six weeks. Each of the cooperating state colleges could arrange for at least five discussion groups, possibly one in each of the five counties with a program of six or more forums to be conducted in each. The project does not, however, contemplate any arbitrary routine uniform in all the states, but rather that the work in each follow a program planned by each with a view to best serving the purpose of learning more about a discussion technique.

"It is hoped that you will cooperate in this project and that you will designate some individual to take charge of the program in your state. It is further hoped that this person might work under your personal direction. Probably the State Extension Service might be able to work out an arrangement with you, particularly in relation to organizing groups, places for meeting and other matters.



“While the project contemplates six discussions for each of five discussion groups to be carried on over a period of six weeks, preparations are being made for supplying comprehensive material on ten topics or more. It would not, of course, be obligatory to any cooperating institution to use any or all of this material.

“This project, covering as it would counties in important and representative states, could supply a basis for later programs, which would be invaluable. Perhaps stimulation at the beginning may be as far as we need to proceed. There are many who feel that the need for discussion opportunities is so great that a movement might get under way without the necessity of any governmental participation. I believe this would be highly desirable but that assistance at the start is entirely warranted.

“I wish to make clear that the interest of the Department in the discussion method is not based on a desire to convert persons to a given viewpoint.”<sup>264</sup>

Receiving correspondence from both Wilson and Wallace, these ten institutions decided to move beyond the disagreements about how the AAA should have been implemented and looked to future possibilities with the Department. Each state sent representatives to the conference held at the USDA from February 4 to 7, 1935. These included Iowa, Kansas, Massachusetts, Minnesota, New York, North Carolina, Ohio, Oklahoma, Utah, and Washington. Because they represented the major agricultural areas of the country, Wilson felt that an experiment with group discussion in these states would indicate success if the initiative was implemented nationwide.<sup>265</sup>

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<sup>264</sup> *Preliminary Report of the Forum and Discussion Group Project*, 3-4; *Discussion Groups: Summary Report of a Conference Held in Washington February 4, 5, 6, and 7, 1935*, (n.p.: n.p., 1935), 1-2.

<sup>265</sup> McDean, "M. L. Wilson and Agricultural Reform in Twentieth Century America", 417-418. Prior to the USDA's interest in discussion groups, Ohio had been engaged in similar work with its Farmers' Institute resulting in what was termed a great success. John Cunningham, Dean of the College of Agriculture at Ohio State University, wrote to Wallace after his January 18<sup>th</sup> letter to administrative directors at land-grant colleges. He wrote, "Frankly, I feel that Ohio will probably respond to this suggestion as well as any other state. For years we have encouraged our farmers to exchange views in small as well as large gatherings, and we feel that our system of Farmers' Institutes has been quite helpful in this connection.... For instance, during the season 1933-34 there were 358 state-aid institutes held in Ohio, with a total of 1,778 sessions, and a total attendance of 426,581. The average attendance per session was 240." See John F. Cunningham, "Letter to Henry A. Wallace, January 24, 1935," Record Group 16, Box 4, Entry 34, Folder "Ohio", The Records of the Office of the Secretary of Agriculture, National Archives.

At the start of the conference, Wilson opened by noting the gravity of the situation facing American farmers and saw the importance of engaging them as citizens who were concerned about the changing world around them. He began by saying:

“It is true that while each age probably likes to consider itself a transitional one, facing peculiarly difficult problems, nevertheless we of this era do assuredly have some right to feel that this could be reckoned what geologists used to call a cataclysmic epoch, when the relatively quite processes which had endured for long periods suddenly were interrupted by violent change. This makes the thorough discussion of fundamental issues especially important now.

“Perhaps we haven’t given enough attention to the farmer as a citizen. I believe that there are some definite limits to the functions of the Department of Agriculture and the state colleges, but we certainly should not be unresponsive to the larger needs.

“From a good many sources I get the impression that farm people want to understand better all that is going on in this changing world of today. They recognize the play of forces affecting their businesses and lives, forces which originate beyond the boundaries of their farms, or their states, or even their nation. They want to talk about these things and try to see what they mean. From land grant college officials, farm organization leaders, and from farmers themselves, we hear this call. The purpose of this conference is to see of what assistance we can be in filling this need.”<sup>266</sup>

Wilson focused the conference on the central theme of emphasizing farmers as citizens and on a supportive role for land-grant colleges and the USDA in making sure that farmers thought of themselves as informed and deliberative citizens.

Carl C. Taylor, a consultant for the project, echoed Wilson’s desire for discussion about the “fundamental issues” of the day. He noted, “democracy and discussion are closely related, and...the relation of government agencies to discussion groups needs to be very carefully considered.” Taylor reiterated Wallace’s point that the USDA needed to be careful in the way in approached this discussion work to

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<sup>266</sup> *Preliminary Report of the Forum and Discussion Group Project*, 4-5.

ensure that citizens (and agricultural organizations) did not perceive the groups as anything more than an opportunity for men and women to engage one another about issues affecting their lives.<sup>267</sup>

Secretary Wallace joined the discussion and articulated the concern that had been mentioned numerous times: that the project might appear to be propaganda. For him, discussion as an educational pedagogy was an opportunity to not only impart facts, but to encourage individuals to think for themselves. He said, “If this movement toward wider discussion of great public issues is to be worth anything, then, possibly, public agencies must supply machinery for discussion.” The USDA would have an important role to play in creating materials and in coordinating the facilitation of actual discussions, but, Wallace continued, “It is something much more living than the old-time college and high school debate. Maybe the thing that we of this generation will finally work out will prove no better, but it does seem to me that we ought to be able to achieve some better means of getting undeferable subjects discussed in a real and interesting and fair way.”<sup>268</sup> There was a degree of uncertainty about what might actually come of discussion, but there was a sense that something was needed beyond simply arguing or debating with one another.

During the exchanges of the conference, numerous participants expressed the importance of discussion in democracy. LeRoy Bowman, of Teachers College at Columbia University, is quoted as saying, “I could talk for an hour on the relation between dictatorship and speech on the one hand, and democracy and discussion on

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<sup>267</sup> *Discussion Groups: Summary Report of a Conference Held in Washington February 4, 5, 6, and 7, 1935*, 3.

<sup>268</sup> *Preliminary Report of the Forum and Discussion Group Project*, 5.

the other.” In a democracy, Bowman asserted, people discuss public issues and make the ultimate decisions about what to do. Other participants echoed this point. Bowman summarized their statements. William J. Green, from the Washington State Agricultural College, emphasized that there was a need to ensure their efforts were not seen as supporting a particular program but was instead “an effort to promote an educational method, the method of full and free discussion of great public issues.” H. C. Coffey, Dean of the College of Agriculture at the University of Minnesota followed by noting discussion should “leave people with the feeling that they’re better prepared to decide.” The role of the USDA and its land-grant and Extension partners was to “merely provid[e] conveniences and aids for discussion” and to assume that through these actions citizens would be “better prepared to form real opinions on a much broader basis.”<sup>269</sup> Democracy relied on people being informed about issues and taking action in various ways. Discussing issues in “real” ways and being able to form “real opinions” was critical.

Those gathered at the conference not only spoke about discussion methods but also engaged one another in a way that was itself a demonstration of what might be possible in the ten participating states. Presiding over the conference, Taylor told the participants, “This is a discussion group right now, and we are exemplifying the art that we hope to get more people interested in.” He went on to highlight how those in attendance had wrestled with questions, discussed the various possibilities and

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<sup>269</sup> *Discussion Groups: Summary Report of a Conference Held in Washington February 4, 5, 6, and 7, 1935*, 4.

options, and then decided on a path forward. They not only spoke about discussion methods, but also practiced them.<sup>270</sup>

Figuring out the best way to move beyond the debate style of discussion, conference participants discussed the differences between the forum, panel, and discussion group approaches, finally deciding that discussion was most aligned with their interests in greater citizen participation instead of simply relying on others to present information to them.

They worked with a document that would end up being called “Discussion: A Brief Guide to Methods,” revising and editing it for use in their respective states.<sup>271</sup> A consensus was reached that discussion methods would be used, ideally, with relatively small groups numbering between thirty and forty people. Leaders for discussion would be engaged to the degree that they would stimulate discussion “in as few words as possible” and that it would be best for these leaders to be local people well known within their respective communities. While individuals such as Extension agents would convene these discussion groups, discussion leaders were not to dominate discussion.<sup>272</sup>

During the conference, the USDA presented mimeographed materials to be used as resources for various discussion topics, but none of these topics were forced on the states. George Gemmell of Kansas emphasized the point that there should not be an effort at standardization and that every state should experiment with what works

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<sup>270</sup> Ibid., 4-5.

<sup>271</sup> This document would later be published as United States Department of Agriculture, The Extension Service, and Agricultural Adjustment Administration, *Discussion: A Brief Guide to Methods D-1* (Washington, DC: US Government Printing Office, 1935).

<sup>272</sup> *Discussion Groups: Summary Report of a Conference Held in Washington February 4, 5, 6, and 7, 1935*, 6. For suggestions made by the PSD to group discussion leaders, see Appendix C.

for them. There was a strong sense that the idea of discussion was transferable, but the approach need to be articulated and expressed locally. He said, “We mustn’t just go on doing the same old thing. We must be willing to experiment and pioneer and try to help people take hold in a new way of these new problems which are confronting us all now.”<sup>273</sup> The topics presented at the conference were both pertinent and timely.

They included topics such as:

1. What kind of foreign trade policies do American farmers want?
2. Is it in the interest of the nation to have more or fewer people living on the land?
3. What share of the national income should farmers have?
4. Should farm production be controlled on a long time policy?
5. What kind of land policies should the nation have?
6. The farmer and the consumer of farm products—what, if any, are their obligations to one another?
7. What kind of rural life can we look forward to in the United States?
8. Is the farm laborer getting a square deal?
9. What is a desirable tax system?
10. What sort of cooperative movement do American farmers want?

Additionally, USDA administrators gave participants copies of Wallace’s “America Must Choose” and a pamphlet entitled “Economic Bases for the Agricultural Adjustment Act” written by Mordecai Ezekiel and Louis H. Bean.<sup>274</sup> Materials from

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<sup>273</sup> Ibid.

<sup>274</sup> *Preliminary Report of the Forum and Discussion Group Project*, 6-7; Wallace, *American Must Choose: The Advantages and Disadvantages of Nationalism, of World Trade, and of a Planned Middle Course*. In *American Must Choose*, Wallace called for free discussion. He wrote: “...our present difficulties...should be debated throughout America, and on the highest possible plane. These questions should be debated in Congress, in public forums, in city and in country Schoolhouse meetings in every state. This time, our course must not be decided behind closed doors, either in Washington or on Wall Street. The people must be let in on the problem. This time let us open the doors and debate our future course throughout the length and breadth of the land.... And I have faith that we can arouse from the ranks of our democracy, in city and country alike, a leadership that will address itself to fundamentals, and not simply blow off in the empty and prejudiced emotional bombast which has characterized such discussions in the past. Our thinking on such matters must rise above immediate and personal considerations, and above meaningless local bickerings, or our future is likely to be a dismal repetition of our past.” This final statement about rising above “immediate and personal consideration” points to an implicit theory of discussion for Wallace. He saw discussion helping people see beyond their own personal interests. See *ibid.*, 3.

the USDA should, according to the report on this gathering, “raise questions rather than try to answer them.”<sup>275</sup>

Participant responses were generally positive. They had a sense of how they might encourage discussion in their home states. Their suggestions included groups of young farmers, business owners and farmers together, rural men and women together, and retired farmers. H. H. Cutler of Utah broadened the scope of who might be involved in discussion when he said that he had, “no thought of restricting this to farmers entirely.” He was interested in broadening participation to have a more diverse group of men and women rather than a homogenous population. If they were trying to reinvigorate democracy through discussion, why would they not include anyone wanting to be involved?<sup>276</sup>

To Wilson, this diversity within the composition of the discussion groups would afford both the USDA and Extension the opportunity to “gain more adequate information regarding the type of leadership necessary for carrying on discussion groups, the most desirable number of members of a group in order to insure [sic]

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A response to the distribution of Wallace’s pamphlet is seen in a letter to participants in the Farm Forum of Wilmington, Ohio. The county agent, Walter L. Black wrote, “When one reads “America Must Choose” and gains a comprehensive idea of Secretary Wallace’s viewpoint it is clear that...[he] believes that American people must find some way to make intelligent decisions about vital problems fundamental to the welfare of the farm family and the Nation. As those...who constitute the regular attendance at the Farm Forum...you are pioneering in an endeavor which offers promise of widespread adoption during the coming years. As a means of group thinking and intelligent understanding of these vital problems, it is believed that the Farm Forum offers the most promising means to guide the future course of farm policy, both economic and political, as well as the most effective devise to offset the influence of the politician, bureaucrat, radio and newspaper propaganda of vested interested and other methods of selfish groups.” See Walter L. Black, "Letter to Friends of the Farm Forum, February 20, 1935," Record Group 16, Box 4, Entry 34, Folder "Ohio", The Records of the Office of the Secretary of Agriculture, National Archives.

<sup>275</sup> *Discussion Groups: Summary Report of a Conference Held in Washington February 4, 5, 6, and 7, 1935*, 6.

<sup>276</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

maximum participation in discussions, the type of material which is the most useful, and other information [as] well as experience.”<sup>277</sup>

Following up with the representatives from the colleges of agriculture at the conference, Wilson wrote, in a letter dated February 15, 1935, that the conference proved to be of “great value” and the abilities and interest of participants “were of a very high order.” For him, the conference had brought out the fact that “there is no set pattern for discussion and that there are too few measures of the effectiveness of various methods, means and agencies of discussion.” Thus, the work of the trial states would serve as a sort of “laboratory” to better understand the role and efficacy of discussion with respect to public issues. At the conclusion of “whatever is attempted this winter and spring,” Wilson wrote, “there will be an opportunity to summarize results—*if discussion can be treated in terms of results at all*—and out of this experience there will be valuable information for all who have responsibilities in connection with the rural population.”<sup>278</sup> Within weeks the discussion group experiment had begun.

While the conference drew to a close, the conversation continued between the USDA and participants in the respective states. District Agent E. W. Gaither from North Carolina wrote to Wilson on February 14, 1935, saying, “I take pleasure in reporting that the four-day conference on discussion and methods was of considerable value to me personally, and I hope it will prove of value to the farmers of our State.”

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<sup>277</sup> McDean, “M. L. Wilson and Agricultural Reform in Twentieth Century America”, 418.

<sup>278</sup> M. L. Wilson, “Letter to Heads of Colleges Who Had Representatives at Conference, February 15, 1935,” Record Group 16, Box 3, Entry 34, Records of Discussion Groups’ Project File, 1934-1937. Intra-department Correspondence, The Records of the Office of the Secretary of Agriculture, National Archives. Emphasis added. In stating it this way, Wilson acknowledged that the quality and impact of discussion was not something easily measured.



Similarly, P. C. Taff, Assistant Director of Extension at Iowa State College, expressed gratitude for the conference and wrote that it was, “most helpful and well arranged” and assured Wilson “every state representative felt that every bit of information possible was given them.”<sup>279</sup> Reports from across the country showed the extent to which states were actively engaging in this work. In an article from the *Extension Service Review*, the report on discussion groups in Iowa did not have results “in a neat statistical table of ‘number reached’ but [as] a summary of conclusions.” These included:

1. That the series of meetings “proved beyond a doubt” that there is a place for discussion groups.
2. That people are interested in discussion-potent issues.
3. That valuable information is disseminated.
4. That the emphasis is transferred from minor phases in economic problems to the pith of the issue.
5. That “talking out” questions crystallizes public opinion.<sup>280</sup>

Extension directors from other states shared information about their plans and approaches, what topics were to be discussed, and who would be leaders for discussions. This experiment or “laboratory” for discussion methods was getting underway.

On February 16, 1935, Dean Coffey from Minnesota wrote to Wilson: “Since we are all very busy, I would appreciate it very greatly, indeed, if as much material as possible on each of these topics [to be discussed] could be sent forward at once to us

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<sup>279</sup> E. W. Gaither, "Letter to M. L. Wilson, February 14, 1935," Record Group 16, Box 3, Entry 34, Records of Discussion Groups' Project File, 1934-1937. Intra-department Correspondence, The Records of the Office of the Secretary of Agriculture, National Archives; Paul Clifford Taff, "Letter to M. L. Wilson, February 15, 1935," Record Group 16, Box 3, Entry 34, Records of Discussion Groups' Project File, 1934-1937. Intra-department Correspondence, The Records of the Office of the Secretary of Agriculture, National Archives.

<sup>280</sup> "Discussion in the Modern Mode: Iowa Reports Success Sponsoring Group Discussion," *Extension Service Review* 7, no. 3 (1936): 42.

in fairly well organized form.”<sup>281</sup> C. W. Warburton, Director of Extension, wrote to all the State Extension Directors on February 20, 1935. He told them about the conference of colleges that had just taken place and attached excerpts from Wallace’s letter that he had sent previously to conference participants. Warburton noted how, at the present time, “The limitation of funds made it impossible to extend the experiment at this time to include all States, but the Department was anxious to make available the material which has been prepared for whatever use you may desire to make of it.” Included under the same cover was a copy of the document “Discussion: A Brief Guide to Methods,” as well as “Discussion Group Topic No. 1” and “Discussion Group Topic No. 2.”<sup>282</sup> The USDA was responding to numerous requests for discussion materials, sending resources as quickly as possible to interested groups to ensure the initiative’s success during this trial period.

### ***Discussion in North Carolina’s Coastal Plain***

Beyond the responses from conference participants and their superiors, discussion groups themselves were making news in communities. One such example came from eastern North Carolina. On March 22, 1935, the newspaper in New Bern, North Carolina, ran an article entitled, “Discussion Plan Gains Favor with County’s Farmers.” The story captured the strong sentiment from rural people about their interest in discussions. C. H. Riggs was one of the farmers participating in the discussion group in Craven County. He told Extension district agent Gaither that

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<sup>281</sup>W. C. Coffey, "Letter to M. L. Wilson, February 16, 1935," Record Group 16, Box 3, Entry 34, Records of Discussion Groups' Project File, 1934-1937. Intra-department Correspondence, The Records of the Office of the Secretary of Agriculture, National Archives.

<sup>282</sup>Clyde William Warburton, "Letter to State Extension Directors," Record Group 16, Box 3, Entry 34, Records of Discussion Groups' Project File, 1934-1937. Intra-department Correspondence, The Records of the Office of the Secretary of Agriculture, National Archives.

instead of having discussions lasting six or seven weeks, they ought to be lasting for six or seven years. "Mr. Riggs," the paper states, "was speaking of the value the farmers had been getting from the meetings." The hope was, according to Gaither, that the discussions being held in various communities might be continued indefinitely. Another farmer participating suggested that "what is needed in every county is a 'William Green' to speak for the little man, who can't hold his own with the larger landowners who have become established and for whom no one speaks at the present time." This comment elicited a give and take, creating an opportunity for discussion about the role of government, the role of the individual, and the appropriateness for some individuals to remain farmers when it did not seem to prove economically viable.<sup>283</sup>

A week later, *The Sun Journal* ran another front-page article on the discussion group meeting in Craven County. During this subsequent meeting, the discussion had shifted to national land policies, particularly a proposed homestead tax exemption in North Carolina. The article noted how, "Touching upon the homestead exemptions and finding that a constructive land policy in that it would encourage home ownership, the Craven county farmers were willing to go further than that." The discussion focused on issues of taxation and the participants recognized that under the then current system of taxation, "the man who makes an effort to improve his land and increase its fertility and to improve his home pays more taxes as a result." A suggested response was this: a graduated tax on land and a double tax on absentee ownership.

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<sup>283</sup> "Discussion Plan Gains Favor with County's Farmers, *Sun Journal*, March 22, 1935," Record Group 16, Box 4, Entry 34, Folder "North Carolina", The Records of the Office of the Secretary of Agriculture, National Archives.

These suggestions challenged a pervasive problem for the region. Wealthy, large landowners dominated. Such suggestions challenged this social paradigm. As the article continued, “Those were suggestions which the farmers saw as tending to break up large plantations and enabling the tenant to become a landowner.”<sup>284</sup> *The Sun Journal* would continue to run front-page stories for the next few weeks, providing details about the topics up for discussion and about participants in the newly created discussion groups.<sup>285</sup>

On June 5, 1935, a resident of Elizabethtown, North Carolina, wrote a letter to Gaither, providing feedback to him that he had requested from individuals who participated in discussion groups. Gaither then shared these comments with officials in Washington, DC.<sup>286</sup> The USDA administrators, university and Extension professions, and others who participated in the February conference wanted feedback and they were now receiving it. J. C. Willis, of the small southeastern city of roughly 400 residents, wrote that he found “these meetings both pleasant and profitable” going on to note, “There is, I think, a great need for such work” and there are many farmers “who do not read enough to keep themselves informed on subjects of the day and therefore are not able to form opinions or to discuss these subjects intelligently.” *The Bladen Journal*, the local paper in Elizabethtown, also printed articles about discussion groups and how “the purpose of the program, sponsored by Secretary of Agriculture Henry A. Wallace, is to stimulate thinking and studying and agricultural

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<sup>284</sup> According to the reports maintained by Gaither, the group in Craven County was made up of adult farmers from all sections of the county. Women also participated at three of the meetings.

<sup>285</sup> “Craven Farmers Favor Homestead Tax Exemption, *Sun Journal*, March 29, 1935,” Record Group 16, Box 4, Entry 34, Folder “North Carolina”, The Records of the Office of the Secretary of Agriculture, National Archives.

<sup>286</sup> These letters were not unsolicited and thus should be viewed with a degree of suspicion about whether they would have been written if not for the encouragement of Extension agent Gaither.

matters from both a local and national viewpoint.” It was through the “give and take of what is said in discussion groups,” according to Gaither, that the individual “acquires the ability to look behind the catchphrases and see if they have meaning, to analyze policies advocated by different interests, and to formulate and express his own point of view on these policies.”<sup>287</sup>

J. S. Melvin, from Parkersburg, North Carolina, was part of one of the discussion groups. He wrote in support of the project on May 31, 1935: “We have organized what we hope is a permanent discussion group in our county.... I don’t think there is anything the government could do that would benefit more people than to finance a group in at least each county in the U.S. I think this work could be done more successfully through our Land Grant Colleges!” Another participant noted, “I think [the discussion group] is very educational to the farmers. I think they should be continued in as I learned something new at each meeting that I attended. I think others did also.” The frequency of the meetings was a topic raised by C. R. Jordan who wrote, “It is my opinion that if these meetings were continued, perhaps not weekly, but monthly or semi-monthly it would be not only a means of providing some form of instruction, but they provoke thought and ideas together with discussion.” Jordan continued, “In this particular locality, serving a meal at each meeting appeals to me as being a method of fostering and improving fellowship between members from opposite sections of the County.” Not only were topics discussed, but also

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<sup>287</sup> J. C. Willis, "Letter to E. W. Gaither, June 5, 1935," Record Group 16, Box 4, Entry 34, Folder "North Carolina", The Records of the Office of the Secretary of Agriculture, National Archives; "Group Discussions Sponsored for N. C. Farm Operators, *Bladen Journal*, March 28, 1935," Record Group 16, Box 4, Entry 34, Folder "North Carolina", The Records of the Office of the Secretary of Agriculture, National Archives.

relationships were being cultivated because of the process of gathering together and through the act of discussion. The preceding years in which Americans had faced such hardship and struggle alone were countered by this intentional effort to afford citizens an opportunity to gather together, share food, and learn about the shared challenges and opportunities ahead.<sup>288</sup>

Differing from many of the other letters, Oliver Carter, Jr., an attorney from Elizabethtown, also wrote to Gaither. He explained, in depth, what he saw as the promise of the project:

“I am almost afraid to advance any personal opinion as to the value of this work because of the fact that I am so enthused with the possibilities that appear to me to be latent in this plan. I am afraid I will permit my enthusiasm to get the upper hand of my judgment and overrate the value of this movement. However, as so many others of our group here feel the same way I do and evidence the same enthusiasm it is not likely that we would all be wrong, there, I advance my opinion for whatever it may be worth. May I add that the following statements must be confined of course to general scope as time will not permit an elaborate discussion of this question and the occasion does not require such detail.

I have tried to appraise the plan with two view points in mind, namely: (1) that since this is a government of, for and by the people, in theory if not in fact, we should further that principle by placing before and in the hands of the people all information available concerning their government, its progress, plans and policies so that they, as shareholders in this great enterprise, may be in a position to intelligently select, condemn or accept the whole or any part of some, and (2) speaking of agriculture principally, since the government has elected to assist the debt ridden and heretofore helpless farmer who has been the innocent and ignorant target of all kinds of cycles, schemes and theories, the beneficiary should be informed of the plans and progress through which the government expects to aid him, the

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<sup>288</sup> J. S. Melvin, "Letter to E. W. Gaither, May 31, 1935," Record Group 16, Box 4, Entry 34, Folder "North Carolina", The Records of the Office of the Secretary of Agriculture, National Archives; D. L. Smith, "Letter to E. W. Gaither, May 29, 1935," Record Group 16, Box 4, Entry 34, Folder "North Carolina", The Records of the Office of the Secretary of Agriculture, National Archives; C. R. Jordan, "Letter to E. W. Gaither, May 24, 1935," Record Group 16, Box 4, Entry 34, Folder "North Carolina", The Records of the Office of the Secretary of Agriculture, National Archives.

methods to be used in putting the plans into affect, and the benefits that may reasonably be expected from the operation of the same. That's rather a rough way to express what I have in mind but it is something like it at any rate."<sup>289</sup>

He continued by noting the "good which has already been done in this county" because of the group and the commitment to continuing it on a permanent basis. This was not a simple thing to do because, "Many of our members travel a distance of 50 to 60 miles, roundtrip, to attend these meetings and they attend every meeting too." In closing his five-page typed letter, Carter positioned himself in relationship to the others in the group. He wrote, "I am not a farmer. I practice law, but fully realize my relationship with this basic industry and recognize the fact that I am directly and indirectly dependent upon the success of the men engaged in the business of agriculture for my success, therefore, my interest in this work.... I sincerely hope that the Agricultural Department of our Government will see the possibilities in this movement and lead every effort to the establishment of these organizations all over the United States."<sup>290</sup>

The impact of the discussion groups was proving positive in the small, rural communities in eastern North Carolina. A story in *The Smithfield Herald* gives clarity to what many others in the state had expressed through their letters in support of the discussion groups. The editorial's author wrote supportively:

"It is a reassuring experience to sit in on one of the round table discussions which a group of Johnston county farmers are conducting in the courthouse each Friday night and to hear these men think aloud together on problems generally regarded as academic and for brain trusters only and to hear them offer their opinions based upon an actual

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<sup>289</sup> Oliver Carter, "Letter to E. W. Gaither, May 26, 1935," Record Group 16, Box 4, Entry 34, Folder "North Carolina", The Records of the Office of the Secretary of Agriculture, National Archives.

<sup>290</sup> Ibid.

knowledge of relevant situations. Farmers grouped about a table intelligently discussing the kind of foreign trade policies our nation should pursue, attempting to determine whether it be in the interest of the nation to have more of fewer people living on the land, seeking to discover the proper share of national income that farmers should have in order to achieve and maintain a working balance between agriculture and industry, discussion whether farm production should be controlled as long-time policy—surely, such a picture is a sign of progress.

The time has arrived when farmers, if they are to attain success in their chosen enterprise, must understand intelligently not only the immediate problems of land cultivation but also the economic relationship of agriculture in a world of many industries and the problem of making agriculture an economically sound endeavor.

Realizing this need, the United States Department of Agriculture arranged in a few states picked at random discussion meetings such as those being held in this county. Johnston is one of five counties in North Carolina in which the meetings are being held. If the present series produces advantageous results, the program will be broadened to take in every agricultural community.

The far-reaching results which such a broadened program would have is obvious. An informed public opinion among farmers—a real need in a democratic form of government—would be brought about which would tend to destroy any efforts toward establishing an agricultural dictatorship.

Agricultural referendums, such as those held last fall on the Bankhead and Kerr-Smith acts, would be of real significance if they reflected the sentiment of an informed farm population. That is not to say that the referendums of last fall were not conducted in good faith. They served a good purpose, yet few will deny that the farmers who voted on whether to retain the Bankhead and Kerr-Smith acts were comparatively uninformed as to the far-reaching economic effects of those two measures.

The plan of farmers meeting together on stated occasions to discuss problems affecting their industry will produce more intelligent voters and in turn will tend to make our form of government democratic in fact as well as in theory.”<sup>291</sup>

Discussion groups, according to the journalist observing the group in Johnston

County, embodied a shift toward more intelligent and thoughtful citizenship. Complex problems were made accessible and comprehensible through discussion methods that

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<sup>291</sup> "An Informed Public Opinion among Farmers, *Smithfield Herald*," Record Group 16, Box 4, Entry 34, Folder "North Carolina", The Records of the Office of the Secretary of Agriculture, National Archives.



allowed each person to learn, listen, and speak. Individuals were able to more fully grasp policies impacting their lives as either farmers or as people directly shaped by agricultural policy because of their presence in rural communities.

Discussion groups also proved to be settings where those disadvantaged through education and social standing could improve their farming by learning from others to build on what they already knew from their own experience of working the land. Discussion was paramount, but that was not to the exclusion of expertise and factual information. As one participant put it, “public discussion creates an unusual amount of interest. Very many of these farmers who are illiterate have accumulated a vast amount of knowledge from experience that would be worth a lot more to them if they knew how to apply a little science to their experience.”<sup>292</sup> Through an initiative designed to offer space for citizens to speak their minds and learn together, a two-directional model of education was taking place with technical knowledge contributing to but not dominating discussions.

While those in Craven County exemplified the possibilities and hopes for the discussion groups to encourage active citizens, others in North Carolina faced challenges to gathering.<sup>293</sup> In St. Pauls, North Carolina, the group there struggled because their “chief difficulty in community gatherings...[was] having no suitable building in which to meet.” The impediments to supporting and sustaining discussion

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<sup>292</sup> W. Yates Creech, "Letter to E. W. Gaither, May 9, 1935," Record Group 16, Box 4, Entry 34, Folder "North Carolina", The Records of the Office of the Secretary of Agriculture, National Archives.

<sup>293</sup> T. M. Diggs, "Letter to E. W. Gaither, May 16, 1935," Record Group 16, Box 4, Entry 34, Folder "North Carolina", The Records of the Office of the Secretary of Agriculture, National Archives. It should be noted that the group in Craven County was composed of the Craven County Farmers' Club, an organization of farmers that had held monthly meetings for thirteen years, at which local matters were discussed and addressed. The difference with their participation in the USDA experiment was that the topics also addressed national and international policy.

groups relied both on government support for researched materials as well as seemingly simple (yet important) tasks such as finding places to meet. There was cause for hopefulness, but practical hurdles remained.<sup>294</sup>

### ***Initial Findings on Discussion Groups***

To help with the experimental phase of discussion groups in the ten states, Wilson and others interested in the use of discussion groups utilized the Radio Service to offer a series of seven discussions during the National Farm and Home Hour broadcast by the National Broadcasting Company and a network of 51 associated radio stations.<sup>295</sup> These were broadcast in 1935 from February 19 to April 2. The first radio broadcast was made by Wilson and his assistant, Roy F. Hendrickson. It was entitled “Decisions, Democracy and Discussions.” The remaining topics matched the discussion topics from the February conference: Farmers and Foreign Trade; Which Way America—Landward or Cityward?; What is the Farmers’ Fair Share of the National Income?; What kind of Land Policies Do We Need?; Should Farm Production be Controlled as a Long-Time Policy?; and What kind of Rural Life Can We Look Forward To? With the

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<sup>294</sup> Gerald T. Willis, "Letter to E. W. Gaither, May 27, 1935," Record Group 16, Box 4, Entry 34, Folder "North Carolina", The Records of the Office of the Secretary of Agriculture, National Archives.

<sup>295</sup> United States Department of Agriculture, *Preliminary Report of the Forum and Discussion Group Project*, 7. While this report states this was a seven-week series, others state this occurred over an eight-week period. See McDean, "M. L. Wilson and Agricultural Reform in Twentieth Century America", 419-420; Lachman, "Democratic Ideology and Agricultural Policy "Program Study and Discussion" in the U.S. Department of Agriculture, 1934-1946", 26-27. The use of radio for group discussion would later be used in Canada through collaboration among the Canadian Association for Adult Education, the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, and the Canadian Federation of Agriculture between 1941 and 1965. See Ruth W. Sandwell, "'Read, Listen, Discuss, Act': Adult Education, Rural Citizenship and the Canadian National Farm Radio Forum 1941-1965," *Historical Studies in Education/ Revue d'histoire de l'éducation* 24, no. 1 (2012).

broadcasts nationwide, discussion participants listened “with the same avidity that they did for the ‘fireside chats’ of F.D.R.”<sup>296</sup>

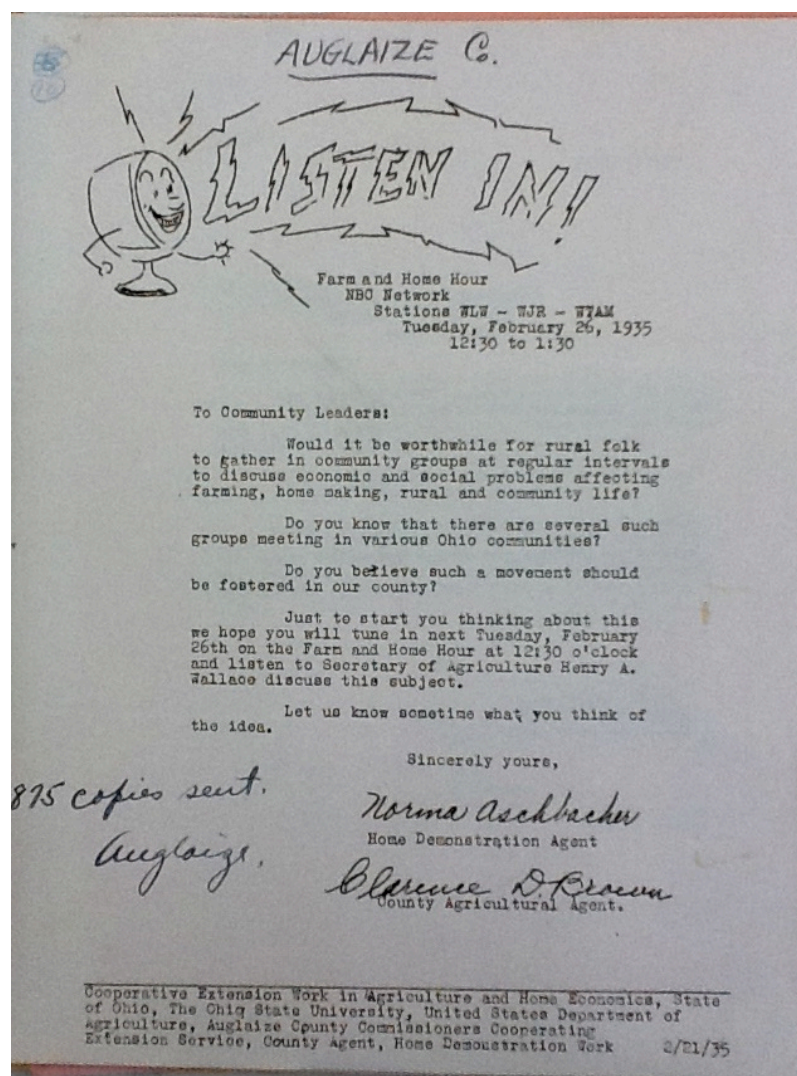


Figure 3.1. “Listen In!” Advertisement for the Farm and Home Hour in Auglaize County, Ohio. Courtesy Record Group 16, Box 4, Entry 34, Folder “Ohio”, The Records of the Office of the Secretary of Agriculture, National Archives.

In the *Preliminary Report of the Forum and Discussion Group Project* from July 1935, responses from the ten states were varied. In Utah the work was “highly gratifying in some respects and rather disappointing in others.” Participation was good

<sup>296</sup> United States Department of Agriculture, *Preliminary Report of the Forum and Discussion Group Project*, 8; McDean, “M. L. Wilson and Agricultural Reform in Twentieth Century America”, 420.

in all the meetings, however only “about 20 percent of those attending were interested in having the mimeographed discussion outlines.” Additionally, topics discussed were comprised of both topics suggested by the USDA as well as others of local interest. In Minnesota there was an attempt to include farmers, but also business and civic leaders as well as young people and women. Groups varied in size, with attendance ranging from a group of 20 to one composed of 47. Unlike Utah, Minnesota’s experience was more structured with Extension agents determining the topics and the order in which they were discussed. Additionally, participants in Minnesota also favored discussion materials outlining the “pros and cons as compared with an outline which would present only one point of view.” The experience, to all participants, had been worthwhile.<sup>297</sup>

The reports back from Washington, North Carolina, and Ohio also echoed the desire for pros and cons to be treated more extensively. In Washington, other responses from Extension leaders included comments from those who thought the materials were satisfactory as presented while one expressed a desire to keep the materials short and brief. Five leaders reported their groups favored the discussion group approach while one remained doubtful about its possibilities.<sup>298</sup>

Adherence to the provided topics was neither enforced nor necessarily even encouraged if other issues would prove more relevant. Veering away from the suggested topics, a group in Oklahoma took on the question, “How can we pay for the New Deal?” While the discussion groups were coming out of the USDA through the land-grant colleges and Extension, the goal of not having the project simply function

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<sup>297</sup> *Preliminary Report of the Forum and Discussion Group Project*, 9-10.

<sup>298</sup> *Ibid.*, 11-12, 15.

as an opportunity for government propaganda was met through the critical discussion about how, in fact, the federal government was going to continue to fund its many agencies and programs. In Iowa there was a desire for the national topics to serve as “openers” in the future, but then to have them be followed by sessions that focused on the local application and impact of such topics.<sup>299</sup>

Suggestions for the future of the discussion group program included a desire for a broader range of topics and leadership training to have a better “cross section” rather than “special interest groups” shaping discussions. Additionally, E. W. Gaither of North Carolina wrote, “I do not know of any line of educational work that needs stressing more than does the discussion method.” Carl Gibboney, an Extension agent in Preble County, Ohio, also expressed this sentiment. He wrote that discussion groups were, “certainly...one of the most effective teaching methods that can be used in Extension work.”<sup>300</sup> Across the ten states, the response was overwhelmingly positive

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<sup>299</sup> Ibid., 13, 16.

<sup>300</sup> Carl Gibboney, "Analysis of Discussion Group and Forum Meetings, Preble County, April 1935," Record Group 16, Box 4, Entry 34, Folder "Ohio", The Records of the Office of the Secretary of Agriculture, National Archives.

During this same period, Benson Landis was traveling around Ohio learning about forum and discussion group. He noted how places such as Preble County had a group of 35 farmers who used the USDA materials and invited the Rotary and Lion members of the county to participate. Montgomery County, where Dayton is located, a group of 35 active farmers from the county who, at that point, had met six times and would “keep on for a while” with at least four more discussion planed. The local extension agent in Montgomery County told Landis, “his farmers were ready for this type of a project and that the would want to meet again in the fall. He hopes there will be quite a variety of outlines available for groups to choose from.”

A highlight from this memorandum came from Landis’ experience in Wayne County where the discussion group “was the kind of a session which would make almost anyone enthusiastic.” He explained the reason for his enthusiasm: “It made a special impression on me because I have always held to a dream that cooperatives could, if they would, get into adult education on a big scale. No publicity was given to this group. It was formed by the county agent and the teacher of Vocational Agriculture. The Agriculture teacher was the leader of the discussions and did a fine job. He was democratic, did not put himself forward, was always encouraging others to speak. The subject was ‘Taxation’ and the representative of the county in the legislature was there. He made a brief statement on tax issues before the legislature. This lasted only from 8:00 to 8:20 P. M. Then until 10:00 P.M. there was the liveliest kind of discussion. The attendance was 55 that night. A careful record of all

that discussion groups should continue in the coming year. George Gemmell of Kansas suggested that a “specialist in each state, working through the Extension Service, could profitably devote full time to the training of leaders.”<sup>301</sup>



Figure 3.2. Included in Iowa’s report on the trial phase, this image is of part of the Rural Young People’s Group in Cerro Gordo County, Iowa. The group gathered five times and usually had 30 to 40 people in attendance. They used the informal discussion method and, as the picture demonstrates, sat in a circle to ensure they could see and hear one another. Courtesy Folder "Iowa," Record Group 16, Box 4, Entry 34, The Records of the Office of the Secretary of Agriculture, National Archives.

The conclusions to the *Preliminary Report* noted the considerable degree of interest in the discussion program and the response was positive with respect to the USDA assisting discussion groups through the circulation and distribution of discussion materials. The role of the radio broadcasts was also critically important since many of the participants lived in rural communities and could listen to or

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attendance was kept. There were 35 regulars and others were invited in for special sessions. I had the impression that a very thorough and interesting job had been done by this group.” Benson Y. Landis, "Memorandum to M. L. Wilson, April 11, 1935," Record Group 16, Box 1, Entry 34, Folder "Landis, Benyon Y.", The Records of the Offices of the Under Secretary of Agriculture, National Archives, 1, 2.  
<sup>301</sup> *Preliminary Report of the Forum and Discussion Group Project*, 21-25. This model would be used in most states.

participate in the larger discussion of topics without physically needing to gather with others every time.<sup>302</sup>

But there were other insights into what discussion groups were to be and what they were not. Discussion methods were more useful when exploring social and economic issues rather than when “taking up technical questions” and were “not scientific research, or a substitute for scientific research.” The role of discussion was not to replace technical knowledge and scientific research; instead, it was about creating a space for citizens with some degree of shared interests to utilize “useful materials with worth while data” for thinking through the issues they faced.<sup>303</sup> Extension agents helped with the dissemination of technical knowledge and research from the universities or the USDA; this role was not to be replaced by the coordination of discussion groups. Rather, discussion groups were an attempt by administrators to institutionalize civic practices that were based, in part, on scientific and technical knowledge. The report concluded with a statement about the usefulness of the informal discussion method for the attainment of an economic democracy:

“As a nation we have always had periods in which the people discussed the nation’s affairs at great length and with high interest. We seem to be in another era when the average citizen is talking much about important issues. The aim of the informal methods is to go the cracker box or hot stove sessions at least one better—by making the discussion of lay people more systematic than they usually are, and by laying before them the schools of thought which bear on the questions they are considering.

It would therefore appear that favorable conditions exist for a more widespread test of the ideas tried out in the winter of 1934-35. If this should be done during the next few years, we would have much

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<sup>302</sup> Ibid., 26; Lachman, "Democratic Ideology and Agricultural Policy "Program Study and Discussion" in the U.S. Department of Agriculture, 1934-1946", 27.

<sup>303</sup> United States Department of Agriculture, *Preliminary Report of the Forum and Discussion Group Project*, 27.

more data to judge the contributions of discussion methods to the building of an economic democracy.”<sup>304</sup>

The experiment had been a success in the eyes of USDA administrators, although there were some farm groups who objected to the USDA materials because “there [wasn’t] any answer in the back of the book.” “Nowhere do these pamphlets try to say what the ‘right’ answer to each question is,” an article in *Wallaces’ Farmer* stated. “Instead, they merely say that there are half a dozen answers, supported by certain evidence. It is up to the farm groups to go over the various arguments and try to figure out how much sense there is in each of them.” In a variety of contexts, citizens had

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<sup>304</sup> Ibid. Rural men and women had long discussed issues across fence lines and around dinner tables as well as in places such as grange halls, houses of worship, and at the general store. But modernization during the first decades of the twentieth century transformed how rural citizens interacted with one another. More than a decade before Wallace and Wilson began to sketch out their deliberative democracy project, USDA economist Charles Josiah Galpin spoke to farmers about the growth of economic centers in rural areas and the diminished role of interpersonal relationships and the neighborly community. A story in the *Toledo Blade* about Galpin put it this way: “Rural Economist Tells County Agents Cracker Box Sessions Are Becoming Extinct.” See “Corner Store Passing Out,” *Toledo Blade*, November 16, 1922. See also Wilson, “Rural America Discusses Democracy,” 288.

The terms “cracker box,” “cracker barrel,” and “stove top sessions” all referred to extended informal discussions carried on by people who regularly gathered in a country store. Country stores often served as gathering places for farmers. The terms emerged because of the prevalence of barrels of soda crackers, around which informal discussions would take place among customers. Similarly, the “stove top” referred to the heat source within stores around which farmers would often convene. An example of this is found in Hubert H. Humphrey’s writing about the role of his father’s drug store as a public space for “deliberation, argument, and action.” See Harry C. Boyte, “Reframing Democracy: Governance, Civic Agency, and Politics,” *Public Administration Review* 65, no. 5 (2005): 537; Hubert H. Humphrey, *The Education of a Public Man: My Life and Politics* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1976), 8-10. A more recent study of such gathering or “third” places is Ray Oldenburg, *The Great Good Place: Cafes, Coffee Shops, Bookstores, Bars, Hair Salons and Other Hangouts at the Heart of a Community* (Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press, 1999).

The desire on the part of USDA administrators to improve the quality of informal discussion among citizens recognized the importance of everyday talk among citizens about the issues that mattered to them. But simply having uninformed discussion was cautioned against: “Political questions of the present day are so complicated and change so rapidly that we can no longer rely on such simple methods of disseminating information.” Frank Aydelotte, “Expert Advice and Democratic Decisions,” *Journal of Adult Education* 12, no. 3 (1940): 258.



grown accustomed to doing what others suggested; deliberative discussion offered an alternative for them to come to their own conclusions.<sup>305</sup>

Aside from critiques about the lack of answers provided, the response from citizens as well as college administrators and Extension agents demonstrated an interest in discussions taking place in communities about agricultural, social, and economic issues. "Hundreds of rural discussion groups may develop all over Iowa within the next year if interest exhibited in this activity by six groups this spring is indicative of its general popularity," read one newspaper clipping.<sup>306</sup> In fact, discussion groups were to become a common feature in rural communities not only across Iowa, but also in agricultural communities elsewhere in the country. The time to broaden the scope and scale of discussion groups had arrived.

In a letter dated April 13, 1935, Wilson wrote to Carl F. Taeusch at Harvard University's Graduate School of Business Administration. Accompanying this letter, Wilson mailed the necessary application forms for employment with the USDA. "If you will kindly fill one of these out and return it to me at once, it will expedite matters in connection with your working with us," he wrote to Taeusch. Less than a month later, on May 8, 1935, Wilson again corresponded with Taeusch. He informed him the

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<sup>305</sup> "No Answers in the Back of the Book, *Wallaces' Farmer*, April 13, 1935," Record Group 16, Box 4, Entry 34, Folder "Iowa", The Records of the Office of the Secretary of Agriculture, National Archives. This theme would come up again in a discussion among extension discussion group leaders in a conference in Chicago. The report from that meeting put it this way: "People must be gotten away from looking to others for conclusions. People are used to being told—in church, school, elsewhere. The fact that they are disappointed when they don't get conclusions is the best evidence for the need among farmers of a new emphasis in education. The primary purpose of group discussion is to encourage and stimulate reflection, rather than arrive at conclusions." A. Drummond Jones, "Memorandum to Mr. Donald C. Blaisdell, [Including Report of the Chicago Conference on Discussion Groups in Agriculture, May 10-12, 1937]," Record Group 16, Box 6, Entry 34, Discussion Group Correspondence, 1936-1937, The Records of the Office of the Secretary of Agriculture, National Archives, 3.

<sup>306</sup> "Farm Groups Will Discuss Economic, Social Problems, April 8, 1935," Record Group 16, Box 4, Entry 34, Folder "Iowa", The Records of the Office of the Secretary of Agriculture, National Archives.

USDA's Personnel Section had certified his appointment and that it would be effective on May 23 of that year. The experiment of discussion groups was transitioning into the Program Study and Discussion Section of the AAA. Receiving help from others within the USDA as well as those from colleges and universities, Taeusch would begin to shape the complementary efforts to the discussion groups that summer—Schools of Philosophy.<sup>307</sup>

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<sup>307</sup> M. L. Wilson, "Letter to Carl F. Taeusch, April 13, 1935," Record Group 16, Box 4, Entry 33, Folder "T", The Records of the Office of the Secretary of Agriculture, National Archives; ———, "Letter to Carl F. Taeusch, May 8, 1935," Record Group 16, Box 4, Entry 33, Folder "T", The Records of the Office of the Secretary of Agriculture, National Archives. McDean, "M. L. Wilson and Agricultural Reform in Twentieth Century America", 421-423; Lachman, "Democratic Ideology and Agricultural Policy "Program Study and Discussion" in the U.S. Department of Agriculture, 1934-1946", 29; Jewett, "The Social Sciences, Philosophy, and the Cultural Turn in the 1930s USDA."

## CHAPTER 4

### “DISCUSSION TIME IS HERE”: THE USDA’S PROGRAM STUDY AND DISCUSSION WORK

“Democracy has to be born anew every generation, and education is its midwife.” – John Dewey<sup>308</sup>

“Democracy does not consist in special forms and sets of powers but in the underlying principles upon which political association rests. To confuse democracy with its tools is fatal to survival and growth.” – Charles E. Merriam<sup>309</sup>

“Discussion is organized talk.... When discussion is used as a method for adult teaching, the teacher becomes group-chairman; he no longer sets problems and then casts about with various kinds of bait until he gets back his preconceived answer; nor is he the oracle who supplies answers which students carry off in their notebooks; his function is not to profess but to evoke—to draw out, not pour in...” – Eduard C. Lindeman<sup>310</sup>

#### *The Creation of the Program Study and Discussion Section*

It had been two years since Roosevelt was elected and the New Deal began. It was now a year that Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. called a “watershed.” He suggested that the “broad human objectives remained the same” but the manner in which they were pursued undertook a significant transformation. “From the viewpoint of the men of 1935,” Schlesinger continued, “the partnership of 1933—government, business, labor and agriculture, planning together for the common good—had been an experiment noble in purpose but doomed in result.” The first years of the New Deal (referred to as the “first” New Deal), “proposed to rebuild America through the reconstruction of

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<sup>308</sup> John Dewey, “The Need of an Industrial Education in an Industrial Democracy,” in *John Dewey: The Middle Works, 1899-1924*, ed. Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1916; 2008), 139.

<sup>309</sup> Charles E. Merriam, “The Meaning of Democracy,” *Journal of Negro Education* 10, no. 3 (1941): 309.

<sup>310</sup> Eduard C. Lindeman, *The Meaning of Adult Education* (Norman, OK: Oklahoma Research Center for Continuing Professional and Higher Education, [1926] 1961), 119.

economic institutions in accordance with technological imperatives.” If the administrators from the first New Deal were “characteristically social evangelists, with a broad historical sweep and a touch of the visionary, seeing America at a great turning of its history,” then the New Dealers of 1935 were “characteristically lawyers, precise and trenchant, confining themselves to specific problems, seeing America as off on a tangent but capable of being recalled to the old main road of progress.”<sup>311</sup>

With such a view of these transitional years of the New Deal, it becomes difficult to align the work of and philosophy behind the discussion groups and of the AAA within such categories. The idea that broad, centralized national planning would be a way forward for the United States was diminishing. Yet, there were those (such as Wallace and Wilson) who remained committed to the belief that America’s way forward was through cooperative relationships based on mutual understanding rooted in discussion and deliberation about the most pressing public problems. For them, the way forward was democracy.

Hired in May, Carl F. Taeusch became the leader of a new section of the Planning Division in the AAA that would be known as the Program Study and Discussion Section.<sup>312</sup> In this position, Taeusch, along with a small staff of six social scientists, worked closely with Wilson on the development of the discussion groups and the educational program’s counterpart: Schools of Philosophy for Extension

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<sup>311</sup> Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., *The Politics of Upheaval, 1935-1936, The Age of Roosevelt* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1960), 385, 389, 391, 393.

<sup>312</sup> In 1939, Secretary Wallace transferred the Program Study and Discussion to the Bureau of Agricultural Economics and changed it from being a “Section” to “Division,” elevating its status.

Workers.<sup>313</sup> Importantly, Taeusch did not simply emerge randomly to do this work. He and Wilson had known one another from more than a decade earlier and he came from a background rooted in philosophical and practical questions about education and its role in democracy. But before exploring Taeusch's work, a brief glimpse at his upbringing and early professional career helps to situate this philosopher turned administrator as an integral piece in the USDA's developing democratic efforts.

Taeusch was born in Wapakoneta, Ohio, in 1889 to a family whose ancestors had come to the United States from Germany. Settling in western Ohio on a farm, his family eventually took on the important civic role as serving as one of the city's grocers. His grandfather, Wilhelm, in addition to being a prominent businessman and grocer, was also "a prosperous and substantial citizen," according to one local historian.<sup>314</sup> Carl shared his family's interest in the economic vitality and life of rural communities, writing about farmer cooperatives in Ohio in 1913.<sup>315</sup>

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<sup>313</sup> Kirkendall, *Social Scientists and Farm Politics in the Age of Roosevelt*, 142-143. The "Schools" would also be called "County Agent Schools," "Schools of Philosophy," "Schools for Extension Workers," "district Schools," "conferences," or "institutes." Cf. Alva H. Benton, "Letter to Keith Tanner, April 23, 1942," Record Group 83, Box 591, Entry 19, Folder "Schools - Michigan 1942 to Date", The Records of the Office of the Secretary of Agriculture, National Archives. Jess Gilbert, in an unpublished book manuscript exploring the Agrarian New Deal, referred to Taeusch's staff as "small but invigorating" and noted the inclusion of Helen Hill Miller, an adult educator with a background in Chicago's labor movement. See Jess Gilbert, "Continuing Education: For Citizens, Scientists, and Bureaucrats."; Helen Hill Miller, *Yours for Tomorrow: A Personal Testament of Freedom* (New York: Farrar & Rinehart, 1943), 110. Miller, in an article published in 1940, referred to their work as "adult education with a difference" and offered a helpful example to explain what she meant: "Members of the Dallas County Forum—and membership is open—are not consumers on the receiving end of public policy. They make use of materials—books, statistics, pamphlets, issued from a variety of sources. They import occasional specialists—technicians from Ames, journalists from Des Moines—to present short statements before the forum starts. But the forum is self-starting. And once it gets going on a subject, it is on the producing end of public policy." ———, "Design for Decision-Making," *Land Policy Review* 3, no. 3 (1940): 31.

<sup>314</sup> C. W. Williamson, *History of Western Ohio and Auglaize County with Illustrations and Biographical Sketches of Pioneers and Prominent Public Men* (Columbus, OH: Press of W. M. Linn & Sons, 1905), 642, 644.

<sup>315</sup> Carl F. Taeusch, "Rural Cooperation and Cooperative Marketing in Ohio, 1913," *Ohio Agricultural Experiment Station Circular No. 141* 1913.

He attended the College of Wooster (1907-1909) and then began his professional career teaching in a public school in Colorado. A few short years later, he sought further education, studying at Princeton University and receiving a LittB in 1914. After teaching again for a short period, this time in California, he again pursued educational opportunities. In 1920, he was awarded a PhD in philosophy from Harvard University.<sup>316</sup>

Following the completion of his doctoral studies, he went on to teach at the University of Chicago for a year, Tulane University (1921-1923), and Iowa State University (1923-1927). In 1927, he was appointed professor of business ethics at Harvard where he also served as managing editor of the *Harvard Business Review* and as acting editor of the *International Journal of Ethics*.<sup>317</sup>

It was during that brief stint when Taeusch was at the University of Chicago that Wilson studied with him, taking his course on the philosophy of history. Wilson considered this course “one of the most enlightening experiences of his life, and it was his hope that Taeusch would engender in America’s agricultural workers a broader outlook on life” as the head of the USDA’s study and discussion work.<sup>318</sup>

During the summer of 1935, Taeusch and the PSD convened a group of philosophers to look at the broader philosophical and social questions that would be shaping the discussion groups and the Schools, the latter of which will be discussed in more detail below. This group consisted of some of the country’s most eminent

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<sup>316</sup> ———, "The Analysis of Judgment, with Particular Reference to Its Categorical Aspects" (PhD Dissertation, Harvard University, 1920).

<sup>317</sup> Hani Morgan, "Taeusch, Carl Frederick," *Dictionary of Modern American Philosophers*, ed. John R. Shook (London: Continuum International Publishing, 2005), 2373.

<sup>318</sup> McDean, "M. L. Wilson and Agricultural Reform in Twentieth Century America", 422.

philosophers, including: G. P. Adams of the University of California, G. A. Balz of the University of Virginia, Kenyon L. Butterfield of the Massachusetts State Agricultural College, W. E. Hocking of Harvard University, George H. Sabine of Cornell University, and T. V. Smith of the University of Chicago. They began their report by stating, “In view of the fact that the farmer is a natural philosopher, farmers’ discussion groups and Schools for county agricultural agents should be encouraged to amplify their studies so as to include the broader social and philosophical implications of rural life.” The development of these topics, they asserted, “must avoid indoctrination or propaganda” and “conflicting views should be encouraged as well as free discussion and study.” The contribution of philosophy was the development of an “attitude of mind, not a final dogmatic set of ideals.”<sup>319</sup> This philosophical approach to agricultural policy appeared, to Taeusch, “to have satisfied in part a long-felt want.”<sup>320</sup>

Embodying what Schlesinger identified with the earliest days of the New Deal, this group valued the farmer not only for his or her economic or productive role in society, but also because “his way of life is a distinctive contribution to American civilization, and he should be led to realize this.” Short-term questions dealt more with economics, but the long-range problems these educational initiatives sought to address dealt with the fundamental questions about the role and function of the farmer in American society, inclusive of but not limited to economic concerns. The problem faced by the USDA was “a derivative of the still vaster problem, that of the society we

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<sup>319</sup> G. P. Adams et al., “The Need for Studying the Broader Social and Philosophical Implications of the Agricultural Program,” Record Group 16, Box 7, Entry 33, Folder “Miscellaneous (Regional Meetings, Summer 1935)”, The Records of the Office of the Secretary of Agriculture, National Archives; McDean, “M. L. Wilson and Agricultural Reform in Twentieth Century America”, 422.

<sup>320</sup> Carl F. Taeusch, “Agriculture Comes of Age,” *Extension Service Review* 6, no. 12 (1935): 170.

are to seek. With this, indeed, the enterprise becomes, not merely economic, not merely social, not merely political, but essentially ethical and philosophic.”<sup>321</sup> To attempt to address such complex problems, the PSD needed to also turn its attention to one of the concerns expressed by the participants of the trial discussion groups: the training of Extension agents. Edmund deS. Brunner and Irving Lorge would state it as a matter of fact: “Training in the skills of agriculture and home economics alone will not suffice. Economics will have to be called upon, as will the sociology of group formation and rural organization.”<sup>322</sup> This belief would greatly shape how the PSD approached its work.

The gathering of philosophers produced an outline for a program of a five-day School in consultation with 250 teachers of philosophy, psychology, history, economics, political science, and sociology in liberal arts colleges. This was in addition to one hundred teachers of agricultural economics and rural sociology in colleges of agriculture. In an undated draft of what would become the foundational structure of the Schools as well as their purpose, Taeusch noted the “rapid development of the duties and responsibilities of the extension workers.” Contemplating whether it would be a “cooperating unit in the Division of Program Planning and Extension Service, or wholly within the Extension Service,” Taeusch stressed the complex nature of agricultural policy because it was “presenting as many ideological problems as has analogously been the case during the last few decades in experimental and theoretical physics.” Extension workers needed to think more

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<sup>321</sup> Adams et al., “The Need for Studying the Broader Social and Philosophical Implications of the Agricultural Program.”

<sup>322</sup> Edmund deS. Brunner and Irving Lorge, *Rural Trends in Depression Years: A Survey of Village-Centered Agricultural Communities, 1930-1936* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1937), 182.



broadly about the many problems involved with agricultural work.<sup>323</sup> Taeusch's own philosophy of democracy and the role of education would be manifest through the work of the PSD and particularly his role in shaping the Schools as opportunities for those trained in technical fields to draw on other disciplines and approaches to better understand the problems they sought to address. Over the next few months, enough progress was made that USDA administrators felt it was time to hold the first School.<sup>324</sup>

That October, Extension agents arrived in Washington, DC, to participate in a conference focused on preparing them to think about agricultural issues as complex public problems. Additionally, Wilson and Taeusch invited a small group—four or five persons—from each of the action agencies of the USDA.<sup>325</sup> While one might assume Wilson played a secondary role with the actual implementation of Schools, a letter from Taeusch highlights the degree to which Wilson was intimately involved from the beginning. For one, he was asked to preside during a morning session and to lead two discussion groups during one of the afternoon sessions. Wilson gave direction, as well as his own time and energy, to the experiment of encouraging practical-minded Extension agents to think about the social, political, and philosophical implications of their work.<sup>326</sup>

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<sup>323</sup> Carl F. Taeusch, "A Proposed Project for Helping Extension Workers Orient Themselves to the National Agricultural Program," Record Group 16, Box 7, Entry 33, Folder "School for Extension Workers", The Records of the Office of the Secretary of Agriculture, National Archives.

<sup>324</sup> ———, "Adequate Perspectives," *Journal of Adult Education* 9, no. 4 (1937): 410-411.

<sup>325</sup> Wilson, "Reminiscences of Milburn Lincoln Wilson," 2092.

<sup>326</sup> Carl F. Taeusch, "Memorandum to M. L. Wilson, October 4, 1935," Record Group 16, Box 7, Entry 33, Folder "School for Extension Workers", The Records of the Office of the Secretary of Agriculture, National Archives.

In a memorandum addressed to Wilson, Philip M. Glick expressed support for the “experiment” because it provided “an affirmative answer to the principal question uppermost in the minds of the sponsors of the School: It has revealed that extension workers, to the extent that the extension workers in the Department are representative of those in the field, are interested in learning of the social, economic, political, and philosophical backgrounds of the agricultural programs which they are helping to administer, and can profit from receiving such an orientation.”<sup>327</sup> But the degree to which these original participants adequately reflected the views those in the field would emerge as an issue. At the October conference, “There were five days of discussions on the philosophical, the social and the economic roots of the Great Depression and on the farm problem. Monday’s topic was “The World Problem;” Tuesday’s “The Land the People;” Wednesday’s, “The Problem of Values;” Thursday’s “Progress and the Ideal States;” and on Friday they concluded with “Philosophy and Social Goals.”<sup>328</sup> There had been a thought about beginning this entire educational experiment in the field, as multiple states offered to host the first School, but that was deemed unwise since they wanted to centralize these efforts at that time and then expand from there.<sup>329</sup>

In a memorandum sent ten days after the conference ended, Taeusch offered Wilson a preliminary report with excerpts from some of the participants. Underlining particular quotes and marking sections in the memo, Wilson focused attention on a

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<sup>327</sup> Philip M. Glick, "Memorandum to the Assistant Secretary, October 25, 1935," Record Group 16, Box 7, Entry 33, Folder "School for Extension Workers", The Records of the Office of the Secretary of Agriculture, National Archives.

<sup>328</sup> McDean, "M. L. Wilson and Agricultural Reform in Twentieth Century America", 423.

<sup>329</sup> Carl F. Taeusch, *Report on the Schools of Philosophy for Agricultural Leaders* (Washington, DC: United States Department of Agriculture; Bureau of Agricultural Economics, 1941), 4.

number of quotes. First, the quotes that expressed a valuing of the School concept and their experience:

- "I believe, first, that the experiment has established an affirmative answer to the principal question uppermost in the minds of the sponsors of the School: It has revealed that extension workers, to the extent that the extension workers in the Department are representative of those in the field, are interested in learning of the social, economic, political, and philosophical backgrounds of the agricultural programs which they are helping to administer, and can profit from receiving such an orientation."
- "The speakers at the School expressed varying viewpoints, and at least two of them delivered adverse criticisms of parts of the A.A.A. programs. I take this to be an indication that it has been determined that the selection of speakers for the Schools choice shall not be limited to speakers who are known to approve of the agricultural policies and programs of the Department."<sup>330</sup>

The next section included criticisms:

- "The discussions were to me not on par with the morning sessions. It seemed to make us a long time to get going, and we felt rather cautious about airing our opinions."
- "Our discussions did not conform to the usual form of extension discussions. I think this was due in large part to the fact that most of us were not sufficiently at home in these fields of subject matter to discuss them comfortably."
- "It would have been helpful to me if the men presenting opposing points of view had had opportunities to discuss their differences with each other before us, and if general discussion had always followed the talks as it did with Dr. Ezekiel."<sup>331</sup>

Continuing with criticisms, Wilson made more emphatic notes, both underlining text as well as marking "XX" in the margins of the report. These included:

- "...I would say one thing that troubled me about the course was the fact that I did not know just what it was for. And in talking with a number of the others that were also attending the lectures I found that they were in the same predicament."

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<sup>330</sup> ———, "Memorandum for Assistant Secretary M. L. Wilson, October 29, 1935," Record Group 16, Box 7, Entry 33, Folder "School for Extension Workers", The Records of the Office of the Secretary of Agriculture, National Archives, 1, 2.

<sup>331</sup> Ibid., 2.

- “To my mind, philosophy and economics are rather diametrically opposed to each other as philosophy deals with ideals and economics with cold facts.”
- “The Maryland County Agent, in one of our discussion groups, raised the question as to whether this discussion group program, if taken to the farmers, would not kill the adjustment program. He stated that the farmers signed up now because of their confidence in the integrity of the extension service.”
- “I would say, however, that in State Extension groups, in general, you could not expect quite so active participation, response, or comprehension. The diet as served would prove too rich for quite a few successful extension workers who are not quickly cognizant of the meaning or implications of the “two-dollar” jargon as used freely by the lecturers.”
- “We could not keep atop our jobs or get results if we attempt to discuss fully any given phase of our work. I doubt if organized discussion for discussion sake will get far in this country.”
- “I cannot conceive of any agent making successful sales and resales based as much on doubts, questions, and negatives as on positive simple statement of fact. I am compelled to say that it was a rather disconcerting experience to find the A.A.A. plan much questioned and doubted rather than having the full support of the U.S. Department of Agriculture and visiting speakers.”<sup>332</sup>

Others suggested further improvements for future Schools. These included providing one-page abstracts of papers presented, a glossary of “important words and phrases commonly and effectively used in philosophy and sociology,” and a statement of objectives at the beginning of the School with reminders throughout “to show what bearing the different lectures had on the main objective.” Such a step, regarding the last point, “would have helped clarify my thinking,” stated one participant. Another participant suggested the inclusion of home economics training, especially because women were to actively participate in the Schools even though men heavily dominated the topics and disciplines.<sup>333</sup>

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<sup>332</sup> Ibid., 3.

<sup>333</sup> Ibid., 4, 5. Women were important in Extension at this time, although they were marginalized in some ways because of the focus on male-dominated agricultural work. One home economics leader at

At the foundation of the USDA's work, Taeusch would write in the December issue of the *Extension Service Review*, was a "substantial record of scientific achievement, pure as well as applied." But there was more to the Department, as Taeusch would go on to explain:

"But those who have followed the writings and speeches of Secretary Wallace realize that [scientific achievement's] implications reach beyond this basic objective. With out retarding in the least the continued progress of agricultural science, indeed, complementing and implementing it, is the growing hope of the Department that in cooperation with the land-grant colleges there may be developed those broader social and philosophical implications of agricultural policy which point to a more abundant rural life as well as the continued contribution of agriculture to the national welfare."<sup>334</sup>

Under Wallace's leadership, the agricultural sciences were ideally complemented and implemented in ways that took into consideration the broader social and philosophical implications of agricultural policy. The Department's vision was not based solely on science or its dismissal. Instead, Wallace and others sought to broaden thinking about agricultural policy and rural issues. The purpose of the initial conference in Washington was to provide Extension with an example and not merely with a "precept" about the use of Schools in their respective states.<sup>335</sup>

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this time was Kathryn Van Aken Burns from Illinois. Writing about a colleague's comment regarding the role of home economics, she noted the role that home economics played in defining what the goal of Extension work was. She wrote, "...the development and growth of home economics in the agricultural colleges brought to them an idealism and a cultural element not always recognized, as well as a new measuring stick. Heretofore, results had been largely in terms of livestock or crops; hereafter, the measure of successful agriculture was the kind of life produced." Kathryn Van Aken Burns, "The Contribution of Home Economics to the Agricultural Program," in *Proceedings Fifty-First Annual Convention Association of Land-Grant Colleges and Universities, Seventy-Fifth Anniversary of the First Morrill Act and of the Establishment of The United States Department of Agriculture, Fiftieth Anniversary of The Hatch Act, Washington, DC, November 14-17, 1937*, ed. William L. Slate (New Haven, CT: Quinnipiac Press, 1938), 50.

<sup>334</sup> Taeusch, "Agriculture Comes of Age," 170.

<sup>335</sup> Ibid.

Wilson and Taeusch hoped the conference would be an opportunity for Extension agents to recognize the “complexity of American culture, and [that the conference] would motivate them to examine their prejudices.” If participants were reexamining their own viewpoints and positions, the argument went, farmers participating in discussion groups would do the same. But the response to the conference was not what Wilson and Taeusch hoped for or expected.

For some within the USDA, the forums were “intellectually stimulating.” But to many Extension agents in attendance, it lacked, in their view, practical application to their work. One participant offered his assessment by writing about the School as being simply too much: “The food was rather heavy.” Continuing with this imagery, he then quoted an etiquette book: “Give to each and every guest, always a little of your best. Give them ever of your prime but a little at a time.”<sup>336</sup> E. J. Haslerud, an assistant county agent from North Dakota, expressed initial concern about the School’s relevance and appeal to Extension agents, but noted how they became more open to this rather distinct approach. He wrote:

“...in regard to the extension School conducted by Dr. Taeusch, I should say our county agents are pretty much from ‘Missouri’ when it comes to new projects and it was the general feeling of the staff here that the first two days of the School did not receive the whole-hearted cooperation of the group. In other words, they were not yet sold on the idea. However, from then on the ice seemed to have been broken and it is the feeling of our staff that the School went over in a very good way, that it was appreciated by the county agents as well as our staff, and that it was very much worthwhile. In fact I have made a suggestion to Dean Walster that a School of this kind replace our annual county agent conference because we have found state district meetings are more suitable to cover the work necessary in conferences with the agents

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<sup>336</sup> McDean, “M. L. Wilson and Agricultural Reform in Twentieth Century America”, 424-425.

where we have the put over AAA programs or other extension work.”<sup>337</sup>

Upon receiving this letter, Wilson called attention to the passage above, sending it to Taeusch as well as to C. B. Smith, Assistant Director of the Extension Service. In his cover letter back to Wilson, Smith expressed thanks for sharing the sharing of the letter and he offered a suggestion: “Haslerud may have a good suggestion on future conferences. Apparently the North Dakota Extension staff reacted about as other States have done to the background School.”<sup>338</sup> After a few days into the School, many Extension agents came to appreciate what was going on, but it remained a dramatic departure for others from their routine work as agents.

Intellectually stimulating to some, others questioned the worth of such questions and topics.<sup>339</sup> This was especially true when they already had a sense of their purpose and role as agents. William F. Johnston, the State Discussion Group Leader in Michigan, wrote to the PSD: “I have been trying to get [agents] to see that if they will adopt the Discussion Method in their educational program, that they will do better than the lecture method now in use. However it is not easy to tear educators away from the practices they have used, with rather outstanding success for 20 years.”<sup>340</sup>

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<sup>337</sup> E. J. Haslerud, "Letter to M. L. Wilson, February 19, 1936," Record Group 16, Box 7, Entry 33, Folder "School for Extension Workers", The Records of the Office of the Secretary of Agriculture, National Archives.

<sup>338</sup> C. B. Smith, "Cover Letter E. J. Haslerud's Letter to M. L. Wilson, February 19, 1936," Record Group 16, Box 7, Entry 33, Folder "School for Extension Workers", The Records of the Office of the Secretary of Agriculture, National Archives.

<sup>339</sup> One example of a positive response to participation in Schools and their discussions came from Virgil Gilman of Montana State College who noted how, even many years after participating, he recalled how when he and others “were somewhat surprised to find applications of some of these general philosophical ideals to our everyday jobs. Really, I suppose, there were applications in many different directions.” See Gilman, "Enlightened Citizenry - Notes on Process," 39.

<sup>340</sup> William F. Johnston, "Letter to A. Drummond Jones, February 22, 1937," Record Group 83, Box 623, Entry 19, Folder "Schools - Michigan", The Records of the Office of the Secretary of Agriculture, National Archives. Importantly, the notion that there was a normative routine for Extension agents runs

Gladys L. Baker would capture vividly this sentiment in her study of the county agent when she wrote:

“County agents who were responsible for setting up the discussion groups in communities and counties were not always enthusiastic about this additional project advocated by the Department of Agriculture at a time when they were already burdened with numerous federal programs. The training and experience of the agents did not fit them with the necessary tolerance and objectivity for this task; for they were accustomed to parceling out a continuous supply of ‘right answers’ to immediately pressing farm problems and consequently often found it difficult to see the practical value of philosophical discussion groups.”<sup>341</sup>

County agents had, by and large, developed programs in ways that aligned their work with the interests and needs of farmers, particularly in economic terms. Since the formation of the Extension Service, its role to improve rural life was at least partially—if not more so—about improving the economic standing of rural men and

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counter to the historical reality that the Smith-Lever Act and the creation of the Extension system did not state what the *ends* of its work ought to be. This reflected, from the beginning, a “significant debate and disagreement” over exactly what a national system of Extension was supposed to accomplish and how. See Scott J. Peters, “Extension Work as Public Work: Reconsidering Cooperative Extension's Civic Mission” (PhD Dissertation, University of Minnesota, 1998), 30.

The most familiar teaching method in Extension education was the demonstration method developed by Seaman A. Knapp, although individuals such as Liberty Hyde Bailey had distinctly different positions and beliefs about what Extension ought to do and how. On Knapp, see Wayne D. Rasmussen, *Taking the University to the People: Seventy-Five Years of Cooperative Extension* (Ames, IA: Iowa State University Press, 1989), 34; Willis D. Moreland and Erwin H. Goldstein, *Pioneers in Adult Education* (Chicago: Nelson-Hall Publishers, 1985), 167-185. As Scott Peters argues, the historic meta-narrative with Seaman Knapp as the central hero figure, “is grounded in the assumption that the purpose of agricultural extension work during the years before the passage of the Smith-Lever Act was uncontested.” Peters continues: “Based on this assumption, every educational approach except the demonstration method is dismissed as being ineffective. The problem is, the purpose of agricultural extension work was not uncontested.” See Scott J. Peters, “‘Democratic Extension of the Scientific Morale’: A Neglected Counternarrative in the History of Agricultural Extension Work in the United States,” *Agricultural History Society* (Boston, MA, 2006), 2. Additionally, Harry Boyte and Nancy Kari note how, “In the teens or twenties, few would have imagined Knapp as much more than a specialist with a good teaching technique. His teaching approach, featuring a learn-by-doing method, was useful. But Knapp had little to say about the extension system’s larger meaning and philosophy.... Knapp embodied a naïve faith in science; a disdain for the intelligence of rural populations; and an often striking racism.” Boyte and Kari, *Building America*, 73. Nevertheless, Knapp’s demonstration method and its closely related lecture approach to education shaped how many within Extension approached their work.

<sup>341</sup> Baker, *The County Agent*, 85.



women through improved farming practices based on research conducted at the land-grant colleges as well as at the Experiment Stations. However, Extension did more than focus exclusively on the economic output of farmers. They worked with them to develop and foster a rural way of life that respected and valued its unique features while also valuing the importance of economic prosperity.<sup>342</sup> Liberty Hyde Bailey, an important leader in the development of what would become Extension, understood Extension's work as cultivating in citizens a new way of thinking about the challenges they faced more than simply providing answers to problems. In a speech given on December 13, 1899, to the annual Farmers' Convention in Meriden, Connecticut, Bailey stressed this point:

“We know that we can point out a dozen things, and sometimes thirteen. But after all, it is not the particular application of science to the farm which is the big thing. The big thing is the point of view. The whole agricultural tone has been raised through these agencies. People are taking broader views of things and of life. Even if we did not have a single fact with which we could answer these people, it is a sufficient answer to say that every agricultural college and every agricultural experiment station, with all their faults, has been a strong factor in the general elevation of agriculture and the common good. The whole attitude has changed. It is

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<sup>342</sup> Such a statement is problematized when reading Grant McConnell's assessment of the relationship between the Farm Bureau and the work of the Extension agent. He wrote, “The official conception of the work of the county extension agent has always been one of education. Somewhat paradoxically, however, every report of the program has brought forth masses of statistics on the number of farms controlling insect pests, feeding balanced rations, culling herds, planting improved seeds, and so on. The goals of the program are measured almost exclusively in the language of technical productivity. Thus, there has been strong incentive to achieve the quickest and most extensive application of approved methods.” McConnell, *The Decline of Agrarian Democracy*, 46. Utilizing Boyte's concept of public work helps to make sense of the McConnell's critique by challenging the framework that Extension work was either about education or it was about economic improvement. See Boyte, *Everyday Politics*; ———, *Reinventing Citizenship as Public Work: Citizen-Centered Democracy and the Empowerment Gap* (Dayton, OH: Kettering Foundation, 2013). Instead, if we look through a public work lens, Extension can be about both developing people and profit, to paraphrase Ruby Green Smith. On Smith, see Scott J. Peters, “Preface,” *The People's Colleges: A History of the New York State Extension Service in Cornell University and the State, 1876-1948*, by Ruby Green Smith (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2013), xviii.

the scientific habit of thought and no longer the mere extraneous application of science.”<sup>343</sup>

Standing as a dramatic contrast to Knapp’s demonstration method and to the idea that Extension is primarily or only about increased efficiency and improved economic bottom lines, Bailey spoke about a “point of view” and helping people see themselves and their world differently as being part of Extension’s mission. Discussion methods, as a contrast to some of the other models of Extension education, built on this larger “point of view.”

Discussion groups offered Extension agents an opportunity to use discussion methods as a way to contribute to the “enlightenment of the public and to the civic vitality of the community.” This was accomplished, ideally, in two ways: 1) “by affording an opportunity to its citizens to become active participants in public affairs instead of being mere passive recipients of radio programs, speeches, lectures, newspaper articles, and the like and 2) by opening national problems to serious public consideration. This grounding of local, regional, and national issues and policies in the minds of the people is indispensable to the functioning of a democracy.”<sup>344</sup> But with such stated goals, the PSD and its discussion methods stepped squarely into the political arena, possibly disrupting the relationships among the USDA, land-grant colleges, Extension, and farm organizations—namely, the Farm Bureau.

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<sup>343</sup> See ———, “‘Laying the Very Foundations of Democracy’: The Purpose and Significance of the Spread of the Scientific Spirit in Liberty Hyde Bailey’s View of the Civic Ends and Means of Agricultural Extension Work,” *Agricultural History Society* (Ames, IA, 2007), 11; L. H. Bailey, “Some Facts and Fancies, Old or New, in Horticulture,” in *Thirty-Third Annual Report of the Secretary of the Connecticut Board of Agriculture, 1899* (Hartford, CT: The Case, Lockwood & Brainard Company, 1900), 54.

<sup>344</sup> United States Department of Agriculture, The Extension Service, and Administration, *Discussion: A Brief Guide to Methods D-1*, 1-2.

A major challenge for the PSD dealt with this relationship, particularly the increasingly powerful Farm Bureau and its allies within the land-grant colleges and Extension. As recent as 1921, Orville M. Kile posed a serious question about whether the newly formed Farm Bureau would survive. At that time, other organizations were emerging as possible competitors.<sup>345</sup> But concern that the Farm Bureau would diminish in power was unfounded. Little more than two decades later, in 1943, Wesley McCune referred to the Farm Bureau as “Goliath” and called it the “kingpin of the farm bloc.”<sup>346</sup> The Farm Bureau was the leading interest group in agriculture. Agrarianism, according to Grant McConnell, had been transformed in the first half of the twentieth century:

“...[this was due to the] rise of a structure of political power based on farm organizations that extends from thousands of localities through every level of government to the higher councils of the nation. This structure not only represents a repudiation of the traditional agrarian distrust of power, but in its development has been the direct cause of some of the most disturbing passages in American politics.”<sup>347</sup>

Farmers engaged in political life through organizational channels such as the Bureau, which, in turn, monopolized farmers’ political representation.<sup>348</sup> During the New Deal, the Farm Bureau achieved considerable success “in bridging the sectional, commodity, and partisan political conflicts within agriculture, thus establishing the basis for power that made it one of the most important influences in Washington.” The organization’s membership tripled between the years 1930 and 1938. With interest group politics

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<sup>345</sup> Kile, *The Farm Bureau Movement*.

<sup>346</sup> McCune, *The Farm Bloc*, 165.

<sup>347</sup> McConnell, *The Decline of Agrarian Democracy*, 82.

<sup>348</sup> Charles M. Hardin, “Farm Politics and American Democracy,” *The Journal of Politics* 17, no. 4 (1955): 652.

growing, the Farm Bureau played that role for increasingly larger numbers of farmers.<sup>349</sup>

The PSD was committed to the belief that rural people could benefit from access to information about the issues impacting their lives and not simply rely on others to share information with them as determined to be appropriate. The PSD felt that farmers would make good decisions when they had “the facts and a chance to talk things over.” And while those critical of the Farm Bureau welcomed “Wilson’s discussion program” instead of “pressure politics,” USDA administrators sought to assure the Farm Bureau that they would not attempt to establish new rural groups through these efforts. Instead, the PSD’s discussion work would complement existing farm organizations, providing resources for organizations to utilize rather than challenging them. Roy F. Hendrickson, Wilson’s assistant, wrote to a Farm Bureau official expressing his belief that the Bureau stood to “gain a great deal by getting solidly behind the discussion project.”<sup>350</sup> The Bureau did not feel threatened by this opportunity and extended its support.

Edward A. O’Neal, president of the Farm Bureau wrote to all the state Farm Bureaus encouraging them to participate in the discussion group project. He noted that they could have confidence in the program because, “Wilson and his staff...had no intention of setting up new organizations of farmers but planned to work through existing ones.” O’Neal went on to say how the discussions, if “properly utilized,”

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<sup>349</sup> Campbell, *The Farm Bureau and the New Deal*, 1; McDean, "M. L. Wilson and Agricultural Reform in Twentieth Century America", 466.

<sup>350</sup> Kirkendall, *Social Scientists and Farm Politics in the Age of Roosevelt*, 141.

could result in the effectiveness of the Farm Bureau “in molding public opinion, as well as stimulating interest and participation in local Farm Bureau meetings.”<sup>351</sup>

As discussion groups were being established beyond the original ten states participating in the initiative, the Farm Bureau supported this work. But as we see in a few short years, the relationship between the USDA and the Farm Bureau would alter the course of such efforts to encourage citizens to engage in discussions about economic, political, and social issues that might challenge many of the norms of rural America and the privileged role the Farm Bureau played as the medium between agricultural interests and Washington’s government officials—elected or otherwise.<sup>352</sup>

### *Discussion Across the Nation*

The ten states from the initial discussion group trial expanded their own efforts and many more citizens began to participate in their own communities or regions. While these states were further developing discussion efforts, other states also became involved. By January of 1936, approximately 30 states had active discussion programs. Within three years, more than 40 states had discussion groups organized through Extension.<sup>353</sup>

Farmers and their families were open to discussion groups according to a report for the PSD. This was because discussions addressed a desire for greater opportunities to explore economic and social questions reaching beyond the borders of their own farms. The trend of the groups, according to one report, was to “examine

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<sup>351</sup> Ibid., 141-142.

<sup>352</sup> Since the beginning of the New Deal, O’Neal “had no desire to change the social order” or rural life and instead wanted to see greater opportunities for farmers “within the existing social order” rather than change it. See Campbell, *The Farm Bureau and the New Deal*, 58-59.

<sup>353</sup> A. Drummond Jones, “Farmers Forming Discussion Groups in More Than 40 States,” *Bulletin of the American Library Association* 33, no. 3 (1939): 166.

into and discuss in free and open fashion the lively controversial issues of the day affecting agricultural policies, present and future.” In Virginia, for example, 700 discussion groups had been or were being established (often in association with the county planning program). In the first year alone (1935), 547 groups met with total attendance being up to 47,000 Virginians. The next two years these numbers would grow to 60,000 and 75,000, respectively. Few programs in adult education reached so many people in Virginia in such a short period of time.<sup>354</sup>



Figure 4.1. Farm men and women in Iowa gather together in a home of one of the participants of a discussion group. Courtesy Folder "Iowa," Record Group 16, Box 4, Entry 34, The Records of the Office of the Secretary of Agriculture, National Archives.

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<sup>354</sup> "Discussion Project, January 22, 1936," Record Group 16, Box 5, Entry 34, Folder "Discussion Group - Miscellaneous", The Records of the Office of the Secretary of Agriculture, National Archives, 1; Hummel, "Democratic Control in County Planning," 5, 6.



Figure 4.2. Farm men and women in Iowa gather together in a home of one of the participants of a discussion group. Courtesy Folder "Iowa," Record Group 16, Box 4, Entry 34, The Records of the Office of the Secretary of Agriculture, National Archives.

Virginia was not alone in its high level of involvement, however. Ohio had between 40 and 50 counties with organized discussion groups with 20 additional counties—in a state of 88 counties—asking to participate with the only limitation being the “shortage of state personnel.” Other states such as Kansas, Georgia, Montana, and North Dakota had discussion groups taking place in nearly all counties.<sup>355</sup> The next year (and first full year) of the discussion project saw the number of groups within these states varying widely. One state had 1,700 groups, another 800, and ten states averaged 121 each. The composition of groups varied widely. Some were based on existing organizational structures—including the Grange, Farm Bureau,

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<sup>355</sup> "Discussion Project, January 22, 1936," 1.

and Farmer's Union. In these contexts, discussion was integrated into regular programs. This approach maintained the USDA's promise to the Farm Bureau when it was assured that the Department would not seek to create a competing organization or association in addition to existing farm organizations.<sup>356</sup>

From the PSD's standpoint, groups were to start "not with a textbook or a problem furnished from an outside person, but with issues which he faces today as a citizen of his community, as a citizen of American democracy." A. Drummond Jones, one of the social scientists on staff at the PSD continued:

"In these groups, [the farmer] is learning the meaning and purpose of democracy and is giving considerable time to the process. He is studying not the classical definitions of democracy, or the mere forms of its institutions, but is instead going into how it works in everyday life locally and nationally; where it does not work; why it does or does not operate; how the citizen, himself, can make his voice function in the representation he selects to do his bidding and the bidding of the rest of the people."<sup>357</sup>

And while an element of discussion groups was to help citizens become more aware of government institutions and their (potential) relationship with them, the more important question was about how citizens might become more involved in democratic life in their own communities. People were participating in what Wilson called "one of the most significant things," regarding the discussion of national policy issues.<sup>358</sup>

Understanding what that work was, however, can be enhanced by looking at the particular experiences and impact of discussion groups in one of the participating states. Michigan State College was one of many institutions that responded to the

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<sup>356</sup> Brunner and Lorge, *Rural Trends in Depression Years: A Survey of Village-Centered Agricultural Communities, 1930-1936*, 183-184.

<sup>357</sup> Jones, "Farmers Forming Discussion Groups in More Than 40 States," 165-166.

<sup>358</sup> M. L. Wilson, "The Farmer Looks at World Economic Problems," (Columbia Broadcasting System; National Peace Conference, 1937), 4.



USDA's call for land-grant colleges and Extension Service to be involved in this democratic effort.

### ***Michigan State College – Discussion Groups***

Michigan State College sent a representative, like many other states, to the conference in Washington, DC, during the week of November 4, 1935. They appointed a county Extension agent, William F. Johnston, to the position of State Leader of Discussion Groups. He assumed this role on January 1, 1936.<sup>359</sup> Johnston had started his career with Extension as a county agent from April 9 to October 31, 1917, in various counties and then again on January 1, 1918, with an emergency appointment in Roscommon County during World War I.<sup>360</sup> Decades later, he would respond with urgency to the needs of farmers in the Great Depression as an Extension agent whose position was developed to implement the PSD's discussion group initiative through Michigan.

During his first month in the position of State Leader, Johnston wrote in his monthly narrative report about how Farm Bureaus had "a decided interest" in discussion methods and saw opportunities in using them within their own organizations. Similarly, a number of county agents expressed interest, meeting with him multiple times to determine how to move forward with their respective groups and to develop local leadership. "I am working on the principle that the County Agent is

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<sup>359</sup> R. J. Baldwin, "Report of Cooperative Extension Work in Agriculture and Home Economics for Year Ending December 31, 1936," Cooperative Extension Service Records, University Archives and Historical Collections, Michigan State University, 8.

<sup>360</sup> Addison M. Brown, *Fifty-Seventh Annual Report of the Secretary of the State Board of Agriculture of the State of Michigan and Thirty-First Annual Report of the Experiment Station from July 1, 1917 to June 30, 1918* (Fort Wayne, IN: Fort Wayne Printing Company, 1919), 160.

the keystone, and it will probably take some time for him to ascertain what success he will have in enrolling local leaders,” Johnston wrote.<sup>361</sup>

During the following month things slowed down, primarily due to the “countryside being snow bound.” Maybe due to the cancellation of meetings, Johnston offered a reflective assessment of the use and role of discussion methods in his work: “Am making a detailed study of the 10 suggested topics offered for discussion from Washington Headquarters, and have completed 5 of them. The tremendous ramifications of the field of material, pro and con, covering the world situation as it affects our agriculture and rural life are staggering, and leaves a person wondering if an individual can steer his way out of such a labyrinth.”<sup>362</sup> During the coming months, Johnston offered county agents and other local leaders training in discussion methods, often inviting them to participate in discussion groups themselves so they could experience what they could do with their respective organizations.

As he was adjusting to his role as the statewide leaders of discussion, Johnston offered a particularly insightful comment comes in his April report. After reading Lyman Spicer Judson’s *A Manual of Group Discussion*, a resource that was being widely used in association with discussion groups, Johnston wondered what others were trying to accomplish through discussion. He wrote:

“Studied Discussion manual got out by the University of Illinois; rather an ambitious set up coming from the English Department. Strikes me more of an effort to teach public speaking than the kind of discussion I

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<sup>361</sup> William F. Johnston, "Monthly Narrative Report of Extension Specialist, State Discussion Group Leader, January 1936," Cooperative Extension Service Records, Box 2219, Folder 41, University Archives and Historical Collections, Michigan State University.

<sup>362</sup> ———, "Monthly Narrative Report of Extension Specialist, State Discussion Group Leader, February 1936," Cooperative Extension Service Records, Box 2219, Folder 41, University Archives and Historical Collections, Michigan State University.

would have in mind from an Extension standpoint. The project does not seem to be an Extension activity there.”<sup>363</sup>

The appeal and role of discussion methods went well beyond the scope of the USDA discussion groups, but Johnston questioned how others employed the term. Because “discussion” was widely used during this time, it was interpreted and practiced differently. For Johnston, Extension’s role in fostering discussion meant more than simply the acquisition or improvement of one’s ability to speak well in public. It was about thinking deeply and critically about myriad issues.

The following month, May of 1936, Johnston took his annual leave. He traveled outside of Michigan, spending seven days visiting Civil War battlefields and seeing some of the Tennessee Valley Authority’s projects. But in addition to his own vacation, per an agreement with the director of Extension at Michigan State, Johnston met with his counterparts in Indiana, Illinois, Georgia, Tennessee, and Ohio to see how their discussion group efforts were going. He had met all of them the previous November at the Washington conference and saw this as an opportunity to check in on how others had done with their new responsibilities. He closed his monthly report in a way that highlighted the consuming nature of the position and his recent trip: “So while I call it a vacation, the fact is that I was not very far a way from this project any of the time.”<sup>364</sup>

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<sup>363</sup> ———, “Monthly Narrative Report of Extension Specialist, State Discussion Group Leader, April 1936,” Cooperative Extension Service Records, Box 2219, Folder 41, University Archives and Historical Collections, Michigan State University. Cf. Lyman Spicer Judson, *A Manual of Group Discussion, Circular 446* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois College of Agriculture Agricultural Experiment Station and Extension Service in Agriculture and Home Economics, 1936).

<sup>364</sup> William F. Johnston, “Monthly Narrative Report of Extension Specialist, State Discussion Group Leader, May 1936,” Cooperative Extension Service Records, Box 2219, Folder 41, University Archives and Historical Collections, Michigan State University.

At this point, Johnston had been working as the State Leader charged with the role of introducing Extension agents and citizens to discussion group methods for nearly half of a year. But for all the time spent on the project, farm men and women had their own priorities, situating discussion group participation below some of their more pressing concerns and interests. Additionally, regardless of the statement that the USDA was not advocating particular positions on issues, people continued to be weary of something that seemed so political in nature. Johnston acknowledged this:

“...universally I am met with assurances of interest and the expression, ‘later in the season we will take this up.’ Also I seem to detect a covert suspicion that there are political angles to the project, and that it will be better to wait until the heat of the election campaign has subsided; that is to say leaders seem to fear that they will have a hard time keeping these things down in their groups. So I conclude it will require patience, and constant, genial, and good natured pecking to put this project over.”<sup>365</sup>

While it may have been somewhat difficult to convince people to participate in discussion groups either because they had enough going on with their farms or they were concerned about the political motives behind the discussion groups, Johnston was immersing himself in literature related to discussion methods and the project itself. He was, in fact, working on a manuscript for an Extension bulletin he would later title “Hints to Leaders in the Discussion Project.”<sup>366</sup> His experience of the previous six months highlighted the possibilities and challenges of working with

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<sup>365</sup> ———, “Monthly Narrative Report of Extension Specialist, State Discussion Group Leader, June 1936,” Cooperative Extension Service Records, Box 2219, Folder 41, University Archives and Historical Collections, Michigan State University.

<sup>366</sup> ———, “Monthly Narrative Report of Extension Specialist, State Discussion Group Leader, July 1936,” Cooperative Extension Service Records, Box 2219, Folder 41, University Archives and Historical Collections, Michigan State University. Johnston used this mimeographed document in training conferences for prospective discussion group leaders. See ———, “Letter to Helen Hill Miller, August 15, 1936,” Record Group 83, Box 623, Entry 19, Folder “Schools - Michigan”, The Records of the Office of the Secretary of Agriculture, National Archives.

farmers and others in this way and felt it was important to share his insights with others.

From August 10 to 13, 1936, Johnston attended the annual conference of the American Country Life Association in Kalamazoo, Michigan. The conference theme was "Education for Democracy." Writing about this theme in his monthly report he noted how "[this theme] fits right in with the objectives of the Discussion Project."<sup>367</sup> In fact, M. L. Wilson was president of the Country Life Association that year and had presented a paper sharing the conference title. Unbeknownst to Johnston, his belief that the theme connected with the discussion group work was accurate. Months earlier Wilson had sent a memorandum to Taeusch asking for his help in writing a speech on education and democracy. He wrote:

"I am President this year of the American Country Life Association and will be expected to give the Presidential address on August 11 on the subject "Educating for Democracy." The central theme of the whole conference this year is education and democracy. I wish that you would be thinking about this. Suppose you prepare a very rough outline of the main concept that I could incorporate in such an address. I shall do likewise and we will compare notes sometime in the future."<sup>368</sup>

The extent to which the speech was composed by Wilson and/or Taeusch is unclear, but the content reflected many of the themes found in the PSD's work. As Wilson noted in the speech, the situation of democracy's struggle against dictatorship raised numerous questions about what democracy actually was:

"Is democracy a fixed thing, or is it an evolving, changing idea? Are the concepts of liberty, equality, and fraternity different now from what

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<sup>367</sup> ———, "Monthly Narrative Report of Extension Specialist, State Discussion Group Leader, August 1936," Cooperative Extension Service Records, Box 2219, Folder 41, University Archives and Historical Collections, Michigan State University.

<sup>368</sup> M. L. Wilson, "Memorandum to Carl F. Taeusch, Program Planning Division, May 22, 1936 " Record Group 16, Box 4, Entry 33, Folder "T", The Records of the Office of the Secretary of Agriculture, National Archives.

they were when we lived in a simpler society? Is democracy related to the environment of a people? Did it take one form when we were a nation of frontier farmers, and must it take on different forms now that we have become a complex industrial country with the agricultural frontier gone, and most people engaged in highly specialized activities instead of continuing as members of a self-sufficient family unit such as we had 150 years ago? After all, is democracy simply a faith, an attitude on the part of individuals, or is it also a rule for living which must change as the conditions of life itself change?<sup>369</sup>

This comment was about the possibilities in people. Wilson, along with many of his colleagues, was embracing populist language and rhetoric. He continued by stating three assumptions that were “axiomatic with all those who believe in democracy.” The first was that democracy must be based on a faith in the “inherent capabilities and worth-whileness of the average man.” There must be, Wilson asserted, an assumption the average person has innate intelligence and reason and that because of this intelligence, wise decisions can be made through “the expression of open-minded opinions about the problems of living together.” His second point was that democracy required participation by citizens and that we learn the democratic process by “doing things in a democratic way.” The third point was, in a sense, the way to accomplish to first two. “This faith in the common man and in the democratic method rests primarily upon the educational processes.” Education is responsible for both setting up the framework of ideas as well as aiding the interpretation of those ideas within that framework. For Wilson, to address the “complicated problems of democracy which are at present before us, and which lie ahead, either some new educational agencies

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<sup>369</sup> ———, “Education for Democracy,” in *Education for Democracy: Proceedings of the Nineteenth American Country Life Conference, Kalamazoo, Michigan, August 10-13, 1936*, ed. Benson Y. Landis (Chicago; New York: The University of Chicago Press; American Country Life Association, 1937), 9.

must be developed, or readjustments must be made in some of those we now have.”<sup>370</sup>

Discussion groups were his attempt at reshaping an existing institution such as Extension.

Wilson did not identify the discussion group project by name, but he alluded to this effort by telling a simple story about an “ordinary farmer in an ordinary farm community in the Middle West” and how he and others would meet each Friday evening during the winter. He elaborated on how the small group of eleven farmers decided which topics to discuss as well as the approach they took to discuss them. They did not vote on issues. Argumentation was not the goal.<sup>371</sup> Instead, farmers would “try to see all sides of the question, to get impartial facts, and each one of us forms his own ideas thereon.” To Wilson, this particular account of farmers meeting was of great significance because such a gathering was the “basis for a great hope for democracy.” Discussion was not uncommon in the country and it had recently been encouraged by “the Extension Service, the lecture hour at the Grange, and the educational periods in the meeting of the farm organizations and the ‘co-ops,’ by certain farm papers, by some rural and village Schools teachers, [and] by some of the churches.”<sup>372</sup> Discussion and farmer participation both had deep roots in the history of Extension, but the work of the PSD brought it greater prominence, especially as other

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<sup>370</sup> Ibid., 9, 10.

<sup>371</sup> The desire to have discussion shy away from a voting scheme was also valued in the discussion groups that were part of the Schools. Taeusch, *Report on the Schools of Philosophy for Agricultural Leaders*, 10.

<sup>372</sup> Wilson, “Education for Democracy,” 11, 12, 13.

pedagogies and approaches were being employed more frequently such as lecturing and demonstrations.<sup>373</sup>

Borrowing language that might be found in one of those country churches, Wilson wrote, “The prophets speak of things not happening ‘until the fullness of time thereof.’ I am sure the time has come when there is a demand for a great discussion movement on the part of the citizens.” Wilson spoke about “a national program,” indirectly referencing the PSD’s discussion groups, and how such an initiative “should become one of the major activities in the field of agricultural organization and education” alongside other more recognized goals such as better farm practices and foreign trade. In this context, group discussion was to be seen as both a “means and as an end.” The pressing problems of democracy required that issues be addressed beyond the confines of schools or universities, too often environments where curricular and pedagogy expectations locked subjects in “air-tight compartments.” Democracy needed to be constantly reshaped. It could not be thought about as some abstract issue removed from the real-time challenges facing Americans in their daily lives.<sup>374</sup>

Wilson closed his presidential address with five points: First, a clear differentiation between what group discussion was and what it was not was needed.

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<sup>373</sup> ———, “Rural America Discusses Democracy,” 290. Writing about the process of planning Extension programs during the 1910s and 1920s, one author expressed how, “Thousands of farmers, for the first time in their experience, were given an opportunity by Extension to gather around farm dining-room and kitchen tables, in schoolhouses and grand halls, collectively to study and plan action on their problems.” Fred B. Morris, “Planning County Agricultural Extension Programs,” *Extension Service Circular 260* 1937, 3. Extension played an important role in community development by developing programs “with people rather than for people.” Bryan M. Phifer, E. Frederick List, and Boyd Faulkner, “History of Community Development in America,” in *Community Development in America*, ed. James A. Christenson and Jerry W. Robinson (Ames, IA: The Iowa State University Press, 1980), 21.

<sup>374</sup> Wilson, “Education for Democracy,” 14, 15.



There were techniques to be used to move from an educational model based on listening and memorizing to one based on discussion and thinking. Second, “discussion” needed to be popularized by the likes of Extension and other farm organizations, but not simply in rhetoric. Extension agents had to be, in Wilson’s words, “prepared to back up their sales talk with service and assistance.” Third, Extension needed to play a role in training local leaders in the “technique and methods of group discussion,” and it, “will not come about without organization and effort.” Closely related, Wilson’s fourth point was that demonstrations were needed to show how good discussion occurred, just as Extension did with more traditional agricultural issues such as farming. Knapp’s demonstration method could serve as an example insofar that people might benefit from seeing how democratic discussion occurred before trying it on their own in some formal or semi-formal way. Finally, after discussion groups had been set up, “a great responsibility rest[ed] upon the educational agencies...to service these groups with material that will aid and assist them.” If education had a role to play in democracy, discussion groups were its modern manifestation.<sup>375</sup>

Johnston’s work in Michigan’s countryside embodied what Wilson advocated. In fact, a few weeks after his presidential address at Kalamazoo, Wilson wrote to

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<sup>375</sup> Ibid., 15, 16. Education had long played an essential role in the shaping of American democracy. On its origins, see Carl F. Kaestle, *Pillars of the Republic: Common Schools and American Society, 1780-1860* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1983).

Johnston because the active discussion group program and leaders' training conferences in Michigan had been an encouragement to him.<sup>376</sup>

By the end of November 1937, Johnston had distributed 38,000 pamphlets from the USDA covering the range of topics distributed for use during the 1936-1937 discussion season as well as 1,000 guides in discussion methods for leaders. He met his own goal of organizing 200 discussion groups during the 1936-1937 year. For the next season, Johnston requested 32,000 pamphlets and 1,000 guides based on the belief that similar numbers of participants would want to again be involved in discussions or do so for the first time.<sup>377</sup> Such an embrace of the discussion method by Extension specialists and participants elevated this approach to democratic participation over other suggested approaches such as panel presentations; agents were "loud in their praises" for discussion methods and "practically unanimously condemned the panel method," another approach, but one that was much more divorced from a participatory approach like discussion.<sup>378</sup>

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<sup>376</sup> M. L. Wilson, "Letter to William F. Johnston, August 20, 1936," Record Group 16, Box 2382, Meetings (1) (Discussion Groups), The Records of the Office of the Secretary of Agriculture, National Archives.

<sup>377</sup> "Narrative, Educational-Organizational Work," Cooperative Extension Service Records, Box 2227, Folder 51, University Archives and Historical Collections, Michigan State University; William F. Johnston, "Annual Report, Group Discussion Project, Period, December 1, 1936 to November 30, 1937, Inclusive," Cooperative Extension Service Records, Box 2227, Folder 53, University Archives and Historical Collections, Michigan State University, 6; ———, "Annual Report, Group Discussion Project, Period, December 1, 1937 to June 30, 1938, Inclusive," Cooperative Extension Service Records, Box 2233, Folder 17, University Archives and Historical Collections, Michigan State University. In his annual report from 1937-1938, Johnston expressed some degree of surprise: "It has been agreeably surprising how thoroly [*sic*] people clean up the County Agents offices of these pamphlets. Very few seem to be sticking around." *ibid.*, 4.

<sup>378</sup> ———, "Letter to A. Drummond Jones, November 13, 1937," Record Group 83, Box 623, Entry 19, Folder "Schools - Michigan", The Records of the Office of the Secretary of Agriculture, National Archives.

The project's goal of encouraging individuals to think critically about issues also helped Johnston to rethink and reevaluate his own views. In his annual report for 1937, nearly two full years after he began discussion group work, he wrote:

“A person may fall into the error of taking his or her job too seriously, and ascribing too much importance to the particular work in which he or she is engaged. But rather err on this side than to dumbly underestimate its importance and forever lose the opportunity of performing a real service. The work and study forced upon me by the ramifications of this project, in spite of what conservative nature I have, seems to open my eyes to the enormity of the educational program ahead, or shall I say the re-educational program.”<sup>379</sup>

The following year he seemingly furthered developed his view that discussion and deliberation had great potential to shape democracy and offered a warning to those who dismissed an approach that focused on the interconnectedness of citizens. He wrote, “For the collection of individuals whose lot is in common, but where each goes his own way, in the name of ‘individual liberty of thought and action’, with no sense of cooperation for the ultimate welfare of the whole, there is trouble in store. Failure is their fate....”<sup>380</sup> A rugged individualism, in Johnston's view, was detrimental both to the individual as well as larger society.

Without naming it as such, Johnston embraced a public philosophy that connected the individual with the community of which he or she was a part, acknowledging that one's own fate was inextricably intertwined with others. But for someone who identified himself as having a conservative nature, this stood in contrast with the fundamental conservative view that citizenship in the United States was based

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<sup>379</sup> ———, "Annual Report, Group Discussion Project, Period, December 1, 1936 to November 30, 1937, Inclusive," 10-11.

<sup>380</sup> ———, "Annual Report, Group Discussion Project, Period, December 1, 1937 to June 30, 1938, Inclusive," 7.

on individual rights and freedom. Nevertheless, he expressed his view very clearly: if cooperation wasn't to be, failure would be the result.

His conception of his role in Extension and the work of Extension itself were challenged by his involvement with and commitment to discussion groups: "Twenty years ago Extension Workers were engaged in trying to improve farm income by teaching better methods in Soil Management, Crop Management and Livestock Management, in order to lower unit cost or production..." he wrote in his annual report. But these problems had been replaced by issues such as the "Loss of foreign markets; surpluses... agricultural solidarity, etc. etc." The challenges farmers faced were increasingly both local and global. Their markets were no longer simply their own small rural communities, but understanding what that meant wasn't simple.<sup>381</sup>

Johnston was coming to recognize the degree to which his work and the work of others in Extension was about improving the economic standing of rural people while also being about the cultivation of democratic habits and practices. He concluded his 1937 annual report reflecting on America's democratic origins:

"If Washington, Jefferson and other great men in the early life of the nation were right, when they agreed that the only hope for a Democracy, or Representative form of Government long enduring, lay in a well informed electorate and an educated populace then my experience of leading about 160 discussions with about 1,800 people since starting on this project, and listening to many of the ideas brought out, would lead me to believe that this is the most needed and most important piece of educational work confronting Extension Workers at the present time; that it really constitutes the MUST part of any program we might follow."<sup>382</sup>

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<sup>381</sup> ———, "Annual Report, Group Discussion Project, Period, December 1, 1936 to November 30, 1937, Inclusive," 11.

<sup>382</sup> Ibid.

In a letter to A. Drummond Jones of the PSD written at the same time as this report, Johnston again articulated the importance of this educational work. He wrote:

“The farther we get into this matter, the more we recognize that it is a purely educational method, and one that will not stand rushing. We now have a nice nucleus of leaders who pretty well understand how to lead a ‘properly conducted and purposeful discussion.’ However there remains the task of member training. Members as well as leaders will have to learn the ‘How,’ if this method is to come to its own. This is a pretty uphill piece of business for the community leader, and they are all ‘hollering for help.’ If they do not get it, I fear they will become discouraged at the apparent futility of the exchange of ideas of members who have not yet learned that they must study some; that they must learn to converse rather than argue....”<sup>383</sup>

The conclusion of his letter was nearly identical to the conclusion of his report. He expressed commitment to the belief that Extension needed to educate discussion leaders in ways that helped them make sense of multiple sources of information, both technical and otherwise. Informing and educating the public required training:

“...[to] lay aside emotions and prejudices; to give and take pro and con, without umbrage; to get in the habit of quoting authorities, and to get away from the ‘They say,’ ‘Everybody says,’ ‘Everybody knows,’ and ‘I heard’ approach; to check information, and beware of slogans; to analyze familiar phrases and see if they have meaning; to scrutinize statements put forth by persons, groups or interests, as to motives, and if they tell the WHOLE truth; to learn to distinguish and scotch half truths; in short to learn to think through. We have to remember that the mere assembling of a group of people to exchange ideas, unless these ideas are founded upon the application of many of these processes, is of doubtful values if it stops there, and they do not cultivate such habits.”<sup>384</sup>

The impact of discussion groups demonstrated to Johnston that the more he got into this democratic and educational work, the more the “vastness of the program of re-

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<sup>383</sup> ———, “Letter to A. Drummond Jones, December 17, 1937,” Record Group 83, Box 623, Entry 19, Folder “Schools - Michigan”, The Records of the Office of the Secretary of Agriculture, National Archives.

<sup>384</sup> ———, “Annual Report, Group Discussion Project, Period, December 1, 1936 to November 30, 1937, Inclusive,” 10.

education looms.” Listening to and reading Wallace’s speeches and addresses made Johnston feel he shared this sentiment with the Secretary. There were many challenges facing rural American and Johnston felt democratic adult education had a vital role if educators, administrators, and citizens would commit the time, energy, and resources to such efforts. Looking at the “agricultural problem” and long-term vision, Johnston wrote to A. Drummond Jones of the PSD expressing his belief that society was “going to demand a program of education that will stretch a quarter of a century, and whose success will depend upon how well the spade work is done rather than upon its rapidity.”<sup>385</sup> Taking the time to train men and women in discussion methods would reap rewards down the road. This work was not about a quick fix; instead, discussion work was about helping cultivate a desire in people to think through complex issues with others in order to have a fuller understanding of what’s occurring and how they might choose to respond to those changes.

The results of this type of work with citizens did, in fact, have meaningful impacts on communities. In his monthly report from March 1937, Johnston offered an account of a P.T.A. group in Bellaire, Michigan. Numbering 120 people, the group focused on the topic of an “Agricultural Consolidated School,” a subject, he noted, that was “so controversial in that community that no organization dared brouach [*sic*] it for the past two or three years.” Yet, by having members of that community deliberate, the response was overwhelmingly positive; everyone joined in “until after

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<sup>385</sup> ———, “Letter to A. Drummond Jones, November 13, 1937.”

10P.M., and all went home apparently happy,” Johnston noted.<sup>386</sup> And while affirming stories emerged from this work, the following month Johnston reported a severe drop in participation, blaming much of it simply on weather and the condition of roads prohibiting individuals from “getting out for mere education.”<sup>387</sup> If nothing else, the monthly reports tell the story of the many ups and downs, some within the control of the State Leader and many others well beyond his control. Like virtually anyone else working with communities, there were high points when he felt he was making a real impact and then there were times that ranked “mere education” below other priorities.

That July, Jones came from the PSD in Washington, DC, to Michigan State College to help lead discussion groups with home demonstration specialists and county agents. His experiences led him to make the statement that the composition of groups was much more important for success than “some arbitrary numbers.”<sup>388</sup> This was demonstrated in Ottawa County where, after many months of discussion group meetings, local leadership was developing in a sustained way. Johnston wrote in his report about this leadership development: “Think this thing is beginning to take hold in Ottawa.”<sup>389</sup>

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<sup>386</sup> ———, “Monthly Narrative Report of Extension Specialist, State Discussion Group Leader, March 1937,” Cooperative Extension Service Records, Box 2223, Folder 54, University Archives and Historical Collections, Michigan State University.

<sup>387</sup> ———, “Monthly Narrative Report of Extension Specialist, State Discussion Group Leader, April 1937,” Cooperative Extension Service Records, Box 2223, Folder 54, University Archives and Historical Collections, Michigan State University.

<sup>388</sup> ———, “Monthly Narrative Report of Extension Specialist, State Discussion Group Leader, July 1937,” Cooperative Extension Service Records, Box 2223, Folder 54, University Archives and Historical Collections, Michigan State University.

<sup>389</sup> ———, “Monthly Narrative Report of Extension Specialist, State Discussion Group Leader, August 1937,” Cooperative Extension Service Records, Box 2223, Folder 54, University Archives and Historical Collections, Michigan State University.

In an open and honest letter sent to Extension agents across Michigan regarding group discussion as a method in adult education, Johnston stressed how his own thinking about group discussion has changed.

“At the start of this project, I entertained some doubts as to whether the method could be employed by Extension Specialists, with profit.... Of course the tool is rather new, and like all new tools will have to be used some before expertness is acquired. It is worth trying? During our lives are we not continually faced with more problems that we have the time or information to immediately solve? Are we not therefore constrained to sort out the MUST problems, and try to attend to those most pressing? What are the pressing problems in agriculture and rural life today? Which are the ones occupying “Front Stage” position? The lecture and the demonstration as extension tools have a fine record of accomplishment; along comes an extension in extension methods; a new tool, not to supplant, but to aid and reinforce. Shall we give it a trial?”<sup>390</sup>

Over time, Johnston changed his own perception about the utility and opportunity presented to Extension by the discussion method. He continued to believe in the use of discussion methods and encouraged others to give it a try as well, experimenting with this somewhat different approach from what Extension educators had often been accustomed to doing. They would continue to bring their knowledge to address public problems, but they would do so through a deliberative approach. Discussion was not to replace, but rather support, their efforts. But as with most programs, personnel changes would impact the future of discussion in Extension’s work.

After a long career in Extension—including twenty years before taking on the role of State Discussion Group Leader—William F. Johnston retired on June 30,

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<sup>390</sup> ———, “Letter to Extension Specialists, Re: Group Discussion: A Method in Adult Education, January 22, 1938,” Cooperative Extension Service Records, Box 2233, Annual Report, Group Discussion Project, Period, December 1, 1937 to June 30, 1938, Inclusive, Folder 17, University Archives and Historical Collections, Michigan State University.



1938.<sup>391</sup> In other states, when the individual directing efforts to promote and encourage discussion groups took on other responsibilities or retired, the work was not necessarily continued. Michigan State, however, did not follow that trend. In his 1938 annual report, the director of Extension for Michigan State College mentioned how, “Extension Specialists and County Extension Agents [were] continuing to make use of methods taught in this project.”<sup>392</sup>

During his time in the position, Johnston, with the help of many county agents and other local leaders, was able to help cultivate discussion groups in numerous counties and organizations. More than 70 different topics were discussed by groups he helped convene, going well beyond the topics offered by the PSD.<sup>393</sup> But the work did not end. Discussion groups continued in Michigan with an agricultural economics Extension professional, Claude L. Nash, taking charge.<sup>394</sup>

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<sup>391</sup> In a letter from R. J. Baldwin, Director of Extension Work at Michigan State, to A. Drummond Jones of the PSD, it appears Johnston’s retirement was motivated by “the retirement plan of this institution. The plan has been put into effect and Mr. Johnston will be retired on July 1. As yet we have not made definite plans regarding continuation of this work after that date.” R. J. Baldwin, “Letter to A. Drummond Jones, May 17, 1938,” Record Group 83, Box 623, Entry 19, Folder “Schools - Michigan”, The Records of the Office of the Secretary of Agriculture, National Archives.

<sup>392</sup> ———, “Report of Cooperative Extension Work in Agriculture and Home Economics for Year Ending December 31, 1938,” Cooperative Extension Service Records, Box 2227, 1937 Projects, Extension Schools, Annual Report, University Archives and Historical Collections, Michigan State University, Michigan State University, 19.

<sup>393</sup> Johnston, “Annual Report, Group Discussion Project, Period, December 1, 1936 to November 30, 1937, Inclusive,” 5-6.

<sup>394</sup> C. L. Nash, “Announcement of Training Schools for Discussion Group Leaders,” Cooperative Extension Service Records, Box 2144, Folder 27, Cooperative Extension Service Records, University Archives and Historical Collections. It should be noted that while discussion groups continued in Michigan through Michigan State College and the Extension Service, it does not appear the title of State Discussion Group Leader was used after the retirement of Johnston at Michigan State College. Another source noted that Nash did not assume responsibilities for the “Group Discussion Project” until the spring of 1939. See “Summary of Conference on Discussion Groups at Library in Jackson, August 9, 1940,” Record Group 83, Box 591, Entry 19, Folder “Schools - Michigan 1939 to 40”, The Records of the Office of the Secretary of Agriculture, National Archives, 2. However, documentation from the PSD does list Nash as an active State Discussion Leader as of March 1942. See Carl F. Taeusch, “Memorandum to Division Members, March 17, 1942,” Record Group 83, Box 535, Entry 19, Folder “Division of Program Study and Discussion”, The Records of the Office of the Secretary of Agriculture, National Archives.

While the impact of discussion groups across the state appeared to be generally positive, the initiative seemed to be forgotten by others. In an article in the *Michigan Farm News* from 1944, there is an account of Dr. Bonner Crawford from the University of Michigan speaking at the annual dinner of the Barry County Farm Bureau and the Chamber of Commerce about the complexity of modern government. During his talk, he lamented the loss of the citizen's role in modern democracy. He noted, "This trend toward ever-increasing centralization can be stopped only when each individual citizen decides to take more responsibility in the determination of public affairs and policies; when each individual decides to do his own thinking instead of unconsciously or deliberately delegating this responsibility to someone higher up." His suggestion was for "a revival of the old type town meetings where people met and really talked things over, or the formation of discussion groups which seriously went about the business of getting at the heart of current problems would be health influences in good government."<sup>395</sup>

Sounding a similar theme to the discussion work of Extension and the PSD in Michigan, Crawford and others would articulate a desire to engage citizens in discussion, a foundation of democratic life. But by the time of the Barry County dinner in 1944, the relationship between the USDA and the Farm Bureau had suffered setbacks and increased tension, particularly around the work of the USDA's planning initiatives associated with the discussion groups. Not surprisingly, the statewide efforts that had been made just a few short years prior were not mentioned.

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<sup>395</sup> Einar Ungren, "Barry Holds Town & Country Meeting," *Michigan Farm News*, February 5, 1944, 4.

While transitions were taking place at the state level with respect to staff for discussion work, M. L. Wilson was developing and refining his thinking about discussion, democracy, and the role of citizens and civic professionals. While a departure from the contextual work such as that found in Michigan, it is important to recognize the ideas and thoughts influencing this work.

### ***M. L. Wilson's Developing Philosophy***

During the second half of the 1930s, Wilson was involved in a number of the USDA's initiatives including land-use planning and subsistence homesteads. Yet, he maintained a commitment to the educational work of the PSD. He believed strongly that education was critical if rural men and women were to have an opportunity to maintain their farms and livelihood in a rapidly changing world.

Wilson was writing extensively about the relationship between democracy and education and embraced what Jess Gilbert defines as "low modernism." As Gilbert put it, "On the one hand, [Wilson and others] did believe in many modernist institutions and activities (e.g., science, planning, administrative states, progressive reform). However, they interpreted these terms differently from most of their contemporary elites." He rejected many of the dominant characteristics of the time—the dismissal of local knowledge, history, and tradition—and instead embraced a philosophy of interweaving technical knowledge and expertise with knowledge and experience that was to be found on farms. Wilson, Wallace, and others in the USDA did not exhibit "blind faith in science, states, the progressive future, or industrial farming (which epitomizes high modernism in agriculture)." Wilson and others pursued modernization through citizen participation and the narrowing of the gap between

experts/administrators and “ordinary” citizens instead of what James C. Scott would later refer to as “high modernism.” For Gilbert, these “low modernists” were, above all, “participatory democrats.” The way Wilson and others in the USDA championed this approach was through several interrelated programs including adult education, discussion groups, and participatory planning among other efforts. The valuing of citizens was apparent in both words and actions.<sup>396</sup>

“Farmers are traveling new roads,” Wilson wrote. “They look, as they go, for signposts.” Rural men and women were going to talk about political and social issues with or without formal programs and structure, but the USDA could provide access to factual information “on the new and rapidly changing problems of the day” because the “discussion idea seems to...be one effective way to make democracy and democratic methods succeed.”<sup>397</sup> Wilson had faith in the men and women of rural America but felt they could benefit from educational resources. The USDA’s role would simply be to support the efforts of farmers to discuss the problems they faced as individuals but also as members of a community. Extension agents would play a critical role in helping them discuss issues because of Extension’s role as community-based educators.

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<sup>396</sup> Gilbert, “Low Modernism and the Agrarian New Deal,” 131. Scott offers a critique of centralized planning popularized in the twentieth century and the many shortfalls with such an approach. In one particular passage, Scott tells of a small group of American academics—including Wilson—who were invited to plan “a huge mechanized wheat farm of some 500,000 acres of virgin land” in the Soviet Union. Scott’s critique was that they attempted to plan the entire farm layout from a Chicago hotel room in two weeks since they presumed, “that the key issues were abstract, technical interrelationships that were context-free.” What is striking about this is that Scott used Wilson as an example of someone using a detached and technical approach to planning instead of being someone committed to citizen involvement in planning and decision making. See, Scott, *Seeing Like a State*, 200-201.

<sup>397</sup> Wilson, “Farm Folk Talk over National Affairs,” 33, 34.

Writing to an audience of Extension agents, Wilson stressed that the “time [was] ripe for purposeful discussion about the big questions of future agricultural policies.” Echoing back to Wallace’s image of a new frontier, he stressed the transitional nature of the time as they entered a future increasingly influenced by “science and the machine.” For Wilson, these changes did not simply mean that farmers would be using mechanical tractors. Instead, the transformation they were experiencing was composed of social, cultural, and political elements that had begun in earnest decades earlier with a shift away from self-sufficient living and intimate connections with family and neighbors. People needed to make sense of themselves in a new world. This was especially true in a society where democratic values were the historical norm and people still had the ability to help determine their future, unlike some nations during that time. Educating citizens was essential for the continuation of democracy. “Free and full discussion is the archstone of democracy,” Wilson wrote in the *Extension Service Review*.<sup>398</sup>

Rural men and women did not need to be preached at. Instead, Wilson believed they should be active participants in discussion with neighbors about the issues they faced—collectively.<sup>399</sup> The use of discussion methods was not new to Extension. In fact, such approaches to their educational work had deep roots, although there had been times when Extension agents took programs to farmers rather than creating them alongside one another.<sup>400</sup> “We cannot be certain what these transitional years will

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<sup>398</sup> ———, “Discussion Time Is Here,” *Extension Service Review* 6, no. 10 (1935).

<sup>399</sup> Ibid.

<sup>400</sup> In their study of the Extension system, C. B. Smith and M. C. Wilson identified the early phases of Extension’s work, including collaborative approaches to creating and implementing programs. See Smith and Wilson, *The Agricultural Extension System of the United States*, 132. Rather than

bring farmers. But we can agree that we want to make changes in our agricultural policies and adjustment of all kinds, consciously, deliberately, intelligently—aware as we can be of their full meaning and reason for them,” Wilson stated. He recognized that there had “never been a better opportunity or a greater need for using it as a means of stimulating the flow of pro and con thought.”<sup>401</sup>

In addition to championing discussion to Extension agents, Wilson articulated his understanding of what discussion and deliberation meant for farmers. In his mind, they were choosing the democratic approach to problems, both as a process of “self-education” as well as being a “spiritual and mental process.”<sup>402</sup> Wilson did not define what he meant by such a statement, but one can glean from his writings from this period that education was deeply influential in shaping one’s values and philosophy about life. Thought of in this way, democracy (as a way of life) was inherently infused with values that required individual citizens to engage in individual reflection and group deliberation about the meaning of such values. “The discussion idea seems to me to be one effective way to make democracy and democratic methods succeed,” Wilson acknowledged.<sup>403</sup>

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emphasizing one’s role over the other, Extension agents often served as guides helping citizens develop as engaged members of their communities rather than telling them what to do or simply providing information. Together, agents and farm men and women would ideally create programming that was responsive and appropriate to the needs of a community. C. B. Smith wrote about Extension’s role this way: “Extension is a new type of public teaching in this country. It is not out of books or lectures but is based on situations as they are on the farm, in the home, in the market place, and in the social and community life of rural people.” See C. B. Smith, “On Turning the Page,” *Extension Service Review* 9, no. 12 (1938): 177.

<sup>401</sup> Wilson, “Discussion Time Is Here.”

<sup>402</sup> ———, “Let Us Go Forward,” *Extension Service Review* 6, no. 6 (1935). In his spiritual autobiography, Wilson spoke about the importance and need to find a balance between physical well-being and spiritual and psychological well-being. “It is conceivable that we could have a physical life of abundance, and yet have great poverty on the spiritual and psychological side.” ———, “M. L. Wilson,” 20.

<sup>403</sup> ———, “Farm Folk Talk over National Affairs,” 34.

One can easily find this theme about the centrality of discussion being at the heart of democracy emerge from Wilson's writing and speeches. Speaking at the annual meeting of the American Country Life Association in 1935, Wilson lauded Wallace for raising the point that "within perhaps the next decade, or decade and a half, certain fundamental decisions must be made which will profoundly affect the character and direction of our agriculture for a long time in the future." America did not only face tough years for crops and a struggling economy. It also faced a moment in time that would have the ability to shape society because of the lasting impact from decisions made about fundamentally important issues.<sup>404</sup> Wilson shared Wallace's belief that it was critical for citizens to engage one another in discussion because they had to grapple with the realization that they would, in part, shape the course of society and determine where they would go in the future. Wilson acknowledged:

"Rising in the minds of thinking people are very fundamental questions as to where we are, and in what direction are we going. New patterns of thought are forming. In my judgment these questions cannot be answered satisfactorily by either the natural or the social sciences. These questions involve very elemental thinking about the aims and ends of life and the meaning and significance of ourselves, our institutions, and our history. Let me repeat again that I do not believe that either the natural sciences or the social sciences, depending as they do upon the massing of factual material and the descriptive method, have very much to offer to those who are perplexed with these questions."<sup>405</sup>

These questions—about the aims and ends of life and the meaning and significance of ourselves, our institutions, and our history—were best answered by those seeking clarity through philosophy or religion because, as Wilson argued, it was these ways of

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<sup>404</sup> ———, "Great Decisions Upon Which the Future of Rural Life Will Depend," in *Country Life Programs: Proceedings of the Eighteenth American Country Life Conference, Columbus, Ohio, September 19-22, 1935*, ed. Benson Y. Landis (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press for the American Country Life Association, 1936), 93.

<sup>405</sup> *Ibid.*, 94-95.

understanding the world that made efforts to “interpret the inner meaning of the facts, and to relate them to our daily lives.” Praising social scientists and philosophers for new points of view and new bases for understanding the causes of “maladjustment,” Wilson expressed gratitude:

“[these scholars] helped to reveal some of the problems which we must solve democratically and collectively if this is to be a period of transition to a new ‘Great Age’ in which we, or rather, our children, will be able to live in an economy of abundance and plenty, an age in which humankind will reap a greater harvest of the fruits of science than we of today.... If we are to reach another Great Age by the road of Democracy, it will be necessary for the great mass of the people collectively and democratically to make some very fundamental decisions regarding economic adjustment in the future. It is for this reason that I am so interested in the developing of philosophies and techniques of thinking which may be thought of in relation to Adult Education.”<sup>406</sup>

Adult education played a crucial role in Wilson’s conception of democracy and the roles that citizens with various skills would ideally have. What he envisioned was for the “best facts, opinions and judgments...[to] be made available to the great mass of the people, so that they will be able to think for themselves in reaching conclusions about these great economic and social questions, rather than blindly react to emotional propaganda or to traditional prejudices.”<sup>407</sup> Citizens needed the best available information to make informed decisions about the great economic and social questions they faced.<sup>408</sup>

Education, in this way, was critical to maintaining America’s democratic commitments. “Democracy is bred in our bones and is deep in our hearts, and above

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<sup>406</sup> Ibid., 95.

<sup>407</sup> Ibid., 98.

<sup>408</sup> Such a statement about the need for the best information possible is now an axiom of fields such as mediation, negotiation, and dispute resolution.



all there is something about democracy which relates it to the soil,” Wilson wrote.

Democracy was so deeply embedded in our national life and identity that he struggled to see how it could be anything else. But there was room for improvement in his view, as was always the case. Wilson expressed hope that the entire rural population, because of the USDA’s decision to cultivate democracy through discussion, would advance rural communities “up the ladder of the democratic way of life.”<sup>409</sup>

Stressing that science and the social sciences were best used as tools directed towards “building up” a “belief in and a striving to achieve spiritual values,” Wilson quoted extensively from Wallace’s *America Must Choose*. In this publication, Wallace argued that cooperation was essential “not merely in our own lines, not merely in our own class, not merely in our own nation, but in the world as a whole.” In language and imagery that made many within the federal government dismiss Wallace as an out-of-touch dreamer with too much religion, he spoke about cooperation as the revival of a deep recognition within the individual that the world “is in very truth one world, that human nature is such that all men can look on each other as brothers, that the potentialities of nature and science are so far-reaching as to remove many of the ancient limitations.” Acknowledging the ease of dismissing such a statement, Wallace continued: “This concept, which now seems cloudy and vague to practical people, must be more than the religious experience of the mystic. It must grow side by side with the new social discipline, which leaves free the soul of man. Never has there been such a glorious chance to develop this feeling as in this country today.”<sup>410</sup>

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<sup>409</sup> Wilson, “Great Decisions Upon Which the Future of Rural Life Will Depend,” 99.

<sup>410</sup> Ibid., 104, 105.

Citing Wallace, Wilson situated himself as a supporter of efforts to look at the current situation rural America faced and take a long-term view about how farmers could transform their communities and beyond. Yet Wilson was not only a dreamer. His discourse clearly emphasized the role of democratic participation by citizens as a goal but also as a necessity. Science and social science could contribute to solving problems but these academic disciplines or worldviews could not do it alone. The other—crucial—element was the philosophical and spiritual questioning which transcended any limited perspective, as important as it may be.

In a speech before the USDA, Wilson asked about the role of the Department in the evolution of agricultural policy and posed a series of questions: Where does policy begin? Where should it begin? For most of America's history, agricultural development began with the "farm as a business proposition." In short, agricultural policy was, primarily, based on economics. And to reach the desired economic ends science would "provide the solution to man's problems." But, Wilson continued:

"It seems to me that, great as the potentialities of science are and marvelous as its contribution has been, we make a mistake if we look to it as the panacea for all our ills. Science can increase our knowledge of our environment. It can help us tremendously in increasing the production of our fields it can aid us in foreseeing, within certain limits at least, what the weather will be. It can assist us in combating insects and pests. It can gather the data which will show the exact picture of our marketing and distributing systems. All these things it can do in the field of agriculture. It is not necessary even to mention what it has done and seems likely to do in other fields.

But when we have said that we have still failed to get into the center of the problem of agricultural policy. Science can expand and deepen our horizon but it cannot give us much help in deciding in which direction we should go. Science can do great things in harnessing the forces of nature but for the mass of people it can do little in changing their loyalties and affections. The problem of policy, whether in the realm of agriculture or in any other sector of activity,

boils down to the matter of altering our loyalties and affections sufficiently to allow us to do things which otherwise we would not be willing to do.”<sup>411</sup>

The formation of policy for Wilson, then, was to be based on a cooperative relationship among “farmers, experts, and administrators...weighing and appraising the facts, exercising collective judgment.... through which ideas and opinions can thus shuttle back and forth results in policy-making worthy of a democracy.” While his presentation to USDA personnel was shaped by philosophical questions, Wilson’s contention that policy could be formed in such a way was rooted in practical experience.<sup>412</sup> Groups of farmers discussing and thinking about the “important problems of democracy, and of agriculture in relation thereto” and the “county agricultural planning movement” embodied this ideal.<sup>413</sup> This is what the discussion groups looked like in an address before USDA staff in Washington, DC.

But as the work in states such as North Carolina and Michigan highlighted, Wilson’s rhetoric was not removed or distinct from what actually took place in rural communities. The significance of “groups devoted to considering facts and opinions” was that they were helping to shape citizens’ understanding of national policy. Even those who could not participate in groups were engaged by “reading and listening and

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<sup>411</sup> ———, *The Place of the Department of Agriculture in the Evolution of Agricultural Policy: Address, Department of Agriculture Auditorium, December 11*, (Washington, DC: United States Department of Agriculture, 1936), 4-5.

<sup>412</sup> In the speech, Wilson referred to an example from Iowa State College “a few years ago” in which objectives for agricultural work were “Formulated by the Committee on agricultural philosophy...” This language accompanied more traditional statements about topics such as efficient management and production methods, etc. See *ibid.*, 5.

<sup>413</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

making up their minds.”<sup>414</sup> For Wilson, the movement toward rural discussion among neighbors was a “reaffirmation of the spirit of democracy.”<sup>415</sup>

Extension played an important role in helping convene citizens to participate in what Russell Lord called “semiorganized arguments in schoolhouses, libraries, grange halls, and churches,” but it struggled in doing so if the goal was to adhere to the provided resources. In vivid language, Lord wrote about how discussion groups “have bounced and ricocheted. They are rather out of hand. When it comes to sticking to suggested topics and government outlines, they just don’t do it, most of them.” While such a statement might seem negative, Lord offered a more positive assessment: “To the extent that they do not, the organized introduction of free discussion into extension may be said to have advanced adult education.”<sup>416</sup> Wilson’s vision for reclaiming and reaffirming the spirit of democratic life was alive. But discussion groups were only one half of the work of the PSD.

### *Schools of Philosophy*

When Carl F. Taeusch arrived at the USDA, he played a central role in broadening the work of the Department by looking at Extension agents and envisioning a project in which they would do more than provide research-based technical information to farmers. The idea of raising and reflecting on philosophical and cultural questions as

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<sup>414</sup> ———, “The Farmer Looks at World Economic Problems,” 4.

<sup>415</sup> ———, “Rural Discussion and National Democracy,” *Rural America* 15, no. 5 (1937): 7.

<sup>416</sup> Lord, *The Agrarian Revival*, 168. There are few first-hand accounts of discussion groups. The material referenced earlier to the preliminary work in coastal North Carolina is one such example. Another source comes from Charles P. Loomis’ account of discussion groups in South Carolina in 1937. He wrote, “[Discussions] were hard to start, and no wonder; few had ever asked their opinions; they were more accustomed to receiving advice than to giving it.” Nevertheless, discussion appealed to these farmers and one participant noted that “this discussion idea was worthwhile” and asked to come together again in two weeks to discuss more. See Charles P. Loomis, “The Adventures of a Discussion Barn Stormer,” Record Group 16, Box 6, Entry 34, Discussion Group Correspondence, 1936-1937, The Records of the Office of the Secretary of Agriculture, National Archives.

part of the work of a federal agency typically associated with improving the yield and the price of crops was a shift, but not unheard of. Educational work was not foreign to the USDA and was, in fact, deeply embedded in its history and mission with Extension being the most obvious example.<sup>417</sup> But the dominance of scientific-based research channeled through Extension to citizens continued to dictate much of institution's public role.<sup>418</sup> Contributing to this was the complex role that USDA officials played in rural communities alongside Extension agents, and in large numbers.<sup>419</sup>

The issues Extension agents and other community leaders faced were not only agricultural problems with technical solutions. They were complex problems without easy answers, if there were answers at all.<sup>420</sup> The emergence of opportunities for citizens to discuss and deliberate about issues was crucial for understanding and, if possible, ameliorating these problems. Discussion groups focused primarily on rural

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<sup>417</sup> For example, on civic education in nineteenth-century agriculture, see Glenn P. Lauzon, *Civic Learning through Agricultural Improvement: Bringing "The Loom and the Anvil into Proximity with the Plow"* (Charlotte, NC: Information Age Publishing, 2011). On the development of what would become the Extension system, see Scott, *The Reluctant Farmer: The Rise of Agricultural Extension to 1914*. As Paul Conkin wrote the establishment of the Extension system was "in effect, the final expansion of the Morrill Act" and became the "most ubiquitous facet of the huge Department of Agriculture bureaucracy." See Conkin, *A Revolution Down on the Farm: The Transformation of American Agriculture since 1929*, 23. But even before the Smith-Lever Act of 1914 and the establishment of the extension system, the civic mission of land-grant institutions was playing out in various ways. Farmer institutes, consisting of short courses usually from two to five days, emerged in the 1890s and would continue to grow. By 1914, the numbers had gone from 2,000 institutes with 500,000 attending to 8,800 institutes and more than 3 million participants. See Boyte and Kari, *Building America*, 67.

<sup>418</sup> Much of Extension's educational work was based on Seaman A. Knapp's demonstration method of teaching. See Rasmussen, *Taking the University to the People: Seventy-Five Years of Cooperative Extension*, 34. In a book focusing on the "pioneers" of adult education, Knapp was bestowed the honor of being the most important contributor to bringing the Extension system into existence. Moreland and Goldstein, *Pioneers in Adult Education*, 167-185.

<sup>419</sup> Hummel, "Democratic Control in County Planning," 3.

<sup>420</sup> For recent scholarship on this topic see Frank Fischer, *Democracy and Expertise: Reorienting Policy Inquiry* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009); Carcasson and Sprain, "Deliberative Democracy and Adult Civic Education."

men and women within their own communities. They were opportunities for neighbors to engage one another in the most basic and intimate of democratic practices.

With Schools, the PSD turned its attention initially to Extension agents, but would later expand these programs to include leaders from other organizations and those unaffiliated with either agricultural or educational institutions. As Taeusch noted, “the objectives and programs of the Department had been expanding so as to involve the more extensive problems of public administration and the broader fields of study and action more generally included in political science, economics, history, philosophy, sociology, and psychology and education.”<sup>421</sup> While discussion groups and Schools shared many philosophical foundations and practical approaches, Schools educated leaders. It was adult education for educators.

In his remarks at the end of a School in Pullman, Washington, C. B. Smith of the Extension Service wrote, “I think we are on the road to somewhere—something bigger and better in Extension.”<sup>422</sup> But that road was not easy to make. It required vision and capabilities to undertake such an endeavor.

Wilson spoke about the Schools as an “experiment” and response to the question, “How could the Extension Service, and, through the Extension Service, the colleges, get a greater interest in and understanding of what was then called—and still is—the democratic process?” Wilson would later reflect on this formative period for the Schools. Speaking with a sense of ownership, Wilson expressed his support for the idea of Schools:

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<sup>421</sup> Taeusch, *Report on the Schools of Philosophy for Agricultural Leaders*, 3.

<sup>422</sup> C. B. Smith, “Remarks at Close of School of Philosophy, Pullman, Washington, January 18,” Record Group 16, Box 7, Entry 33, Folder “School for Extension Workers”, The Records of the Office of the Secretary of Agriculture, National Archives.

“I gave it more attention than anyone else. I talked with Henry about it, and he had, of course, complete and exact understanding about it. Henry and I talked about this quite a lot. After I came over in ’34 and ’35 we talked about this somewhat during the campaign of ’36. I think Henry saw the possibilities of this, and he told me once that I should give it a good deal of attention and that I could kind of put this number one on my agenda of interests and objectives.”<sup>423</sup>

Wilson’s support for Schools rested on the belief that citizens (especially those in professional roles) could benefit from educational opportunities that could help them to better understand how democracy worked and how democratic practices applied to their own work. Democracy was not something that happened only in capitals with elected officials. It required greater participation and understanding from people everywhere, with educational professionals being an important constituency because of their roles in broader communities. Wilson offered support for Schools, but it was Taeusch and the PSD who put these ideas into practice.

While the head of the PSD, Taeusch recognized those who envisioned and animated the Schools.<sup>424</sup> He wrote of Wilson: “we owe [to him] the original Platonic idea and spiritual guidance of this project.” With respect to Tolley, Taeusch valued his “practical Aristotelian administrative help in realizing the idea.” Finally to Warburton, the former director of Extension, and to the state Extension directors, Taeusch thanked them for their “cordial cooperation by encouraging Extension workers, from the very beginning of the project, to help organize and attend these Schools.”<sup>425</sup> The Schools were very much a collaborative effort to educate Extension agents in ways that could help them to foster a more democratic rural life. Schools called into question the ways

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<sup>423</sup> Wilson, “Reminiscences of Milburn Lincoln Wilson,” 2090, 2091.

<sup>424</sup> Similarly, Drummond A. Jones, a staff specialist in the PSD, acknowledged M. L. Wilson as the one who should be credited with initiating the “movement” started with the discussion groups and Schools. See Jones, “Farmers Forming Discussion Groups in More Than 40 States,” 166.

<sup>425</sup> Taeusch, *Report on the Schools of Philosophy for Agricultural Leaders*, 2.

agents understood the relationship between education and democracy and their own roles in cultivating democracy. Taeusch noted this issue:

“The problem of educating the voter to take an intelligent part in elections has long been recognized as paramount in a democracy. But we are now rapidly coming to see that this objective is too limited. Of perhaps even greater importance is the problem of educating the administrator, private as well as public, potential as well as actual. For democracy is to be regarded as a continuous administrative process, not merely as a succession of elections separated by 2 or 4 years.”<sup>426</sup>

The need to educate professionals was particularly apparent for an agency such as the USDA. Its staff included administrators at the federal, state, and county level, as well as farmers who were part of committees in their local communities.<sup>427</sup> The Department wanted to cultivate democratic discussion among farmers in rural communities, and Wallace, Wilson, Taeusch wanted those in administrative and leadership roles to also benefit from the experience of listening to and learning from others through intentional opportunities for discussion.

What emerged from the original School in October of 1935 was a general structure and format that would be adapted to the particular needs of the specific states where they were held. While the central administration and organization of the Schools was the responsibility of the PSD in Washington, DC, the Schools only happened when Extension in states, or organizations with statewide membership, requested they be organized.<sup>428</sup> Maintaining the cooperative relationship between the federal government and the states, the USDA provided the finances for the central coordinating office in Washington as well as the staffs for the Schools, including

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<sup>426</sup> ———, "Schools of Philosophy for Farmers," 1113.

<sup>427</sup> ———, *Report on the Schools of Philosophy for Agricultural Leaders*, 9.

<sup>428</sup> ———, "Schools of Philosophy," *Agricultural Library Notes* 16, no. 10 (1941): 480; ———, "Schools of Philosophy for Farmers," 1115.



travel expenses, salaries, and other incidental costs. The states hosting the Schools would contribute all other funding necessary.<sup>429</sup>

Schools typically lasted four consecutive days, often taking place on the campuses of land-grant colleges. They consisted of lectures during the morning sessions, often from prominent and nationally recognized scholars in their respective disciplines. Typically staffed with “six or seven outstanding thinkers in Philosophy, Sociology, Economics, Political Science, History, Anthropology, Education, etc., from the colleges, universities and research institutions of the country,” Schools became somewhat of a “who’s who” of leading scholars. The selection of candidates for lectures was a joint effort between the PSD and the cooperating agency. A general principle was that lecturers would be from the geographical region to “attack...the problems of the region” while some would be from elsewhere in order to “contribute [an] outside perspective.” It was ideally a mix of scholars who had a relatively intimate knowledge of a region and others who could speak from their experiences elsewhere.<sup>430</sup>

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<sup>429</sup> ———, “Adequate Perspectives,” 411.

<sup>430</sup> ———, “Preface,” in *Standards of Value for Program Planning and Building ... Proceedings of School for Washington Staff of Bureau of Agricultural Economics Held in Auditorium Freer Art Gallery, Washington, D.C., October 17-20, 1939*, ed. Mark A. Graubard, et al. (Washington, DC: United States Department of Agriculture, Bureau of Agricultural Economics, Division of Program Study and Discussion, 1940), ii; Wilson, “Reminiscences of Milburn Lincoln Wilson,” 2091-2092. Jess Gilbert and Andrew Jewett have emphasized the role that prominent scholars played in the Schools. This is especially true for scholars from private institutions. See Gilbert, “Low Modernism and the Agrarian New Deal,” 136-138; ———, “Inviting Criticism: The New Deal’s Farmer Discussion Groups and Schools of Philosophy for Extension Workers.”; Jewett, “The Social Sciences, Philosophy, and the Cultural Turn in the 1930s USDA,” 411-412. Jewett offers an extensive list of these prominent intellectual involved with Schools.

The afternoon sessions consisted of discussion groups, dividing those in attendance into smaller groups comprised of 15 to 20 persons at most.<sup>431</sup> County agents or home demonstration specialists led these small group discussions, the heart of the program. Prominent scholars introduced participants to topics and the various ways to think about them, but the deeper discussions about the topics occurred in the afternoon sessions when participants wrestled with questions and possibilities themselves.<sup>432</sup>

Typically, Schools were framed around a general theme—"What is a desirable national agriculture program?"—with the purpose of "education for democracy in agriculture."<sup>433</sup> Taeusch or another philosopher typically began each School by proposing what philosophy and the social sciences could contribute to a study of the present situation, especially as these disciplines helped to inform thinking about agricultural issues. The focus would then shift to understanding the various disciplines and schools of thought as ways to provide background information about the relevant topics for a discussion about agricultural policies and programs.<sup>434</sup>

The second day would consist of presentations and discussions on the place and role of government in society. Questions about individualism and democracy would factor prominently during the second day. The third day shifted to questions about regionalism, nationalism, and internationalism. The fourth day included topics

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<sup>431</sup> In a bibliographic review on the group discussion technique used in both discussion groups and Schools, authors of one of the PSD's pamphlets noted, "Practically all writers in the field agree that an informal small group is the best for discussion. It permits the most democratic form of discussion: participants are all on a basis of equality and its final value is the sum of the individual thoughts expressed." Bureau of Agricultural Economics, *Group Discussion and Its Techniques: A Bibliographical Review* (Washington, DC: US Government Printing Office, 1942), 17.

<sup>432</sup> Taeusch, "Adequate Perspectives," 411; ———, "Preface."

<sup>433</sup> ———, "Preface," i.

<sup>434</sup> Jess Gilbert, *Unpublished Manuscript* (2013).

such as social adjustment, democracy and group leadership, tensions between traditional economic approaches and the present economy were addressed, as well as an educational program for the future.<sup>435</sup>

With this structure and development, there was ideally a cumulative effect of participants' knowledge of the content presented. As public problems were developed over the course of the few days, more "books and articles on administration, government, and social philosophy enter the discussions and titles [were] noted for later reading."<sup>436</sup> Schools were designed as educational opportunities in and of themselves, but they were also first steps for educators to think about their work differently. Schools were outlined in a 1941 report this way: "The purpose of the School is to attempt, through the philosophical approach, to develop a method and an attitude of mind (philosophy) that will enable the employee to give better service to her unit, and at the same time get greater personal satisfaction from her work."<sup>437</sup>

While there was a desired structure and flow, the program was responsive and flexible enough to accommodate issues that emerged from participants. In fact, it was standard for two hours to be dedicated in the afternoons to the discussion of the "materials of the morning lectures as they bear on local problems."<sup>438</sup> Taeusch offered one account of a woman in South Carolina who stood up during a School and named malaria as the issue she wanted to talk about because, as she stated, "that's our main problem." While the topic for the day's lectures and discussions was "Regionalism,

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<sup>435</sup> For the general structure of Schools, see Appendix F.

<sup>436</sup> Taeusch, "Adequate Perspectives," 411; ———, "Schools of Philosophy for Farmers," 1115; ———, *Report on the Schools of Philosophy for Agricultural Leaders*, 5.

<sup>437</sup> Forest Service Clerical Training Committee and Bureau of Agricultural Economics Program Study and Discussion Division, "Lectures and Discussions from School of Philosophy for Washington Employees," (Washington, DC: Forest Service; U.S. Department of Agriculture, 1941).

<sup>438</sup> Taeusch, "Preface," ii.

nationalism, and internationalism,” beginning with malaria focused attention on relevant issues for the local community. Working through the issue of malaria ended up connecting with the day’s original discussion theme. The need to have tighter floors and walls to keep mosquitoes out of homes meant that there would need to be more income. This led to a discussion about the exportation of cotton. According to Taeusch, in the “course of that one discussion group were developed social policies affecting foreign relations, economic principles, and local government in its broadest aspects.” As this example from South Carolina highlights, the way these topics were addressed was responsive to the needs of the particular group gathered together.<sup>439</sup>

As structured educational programs with flexibility built in to respond to such subtle but important adjustments to a scheduled discussion or topic, Schools ideally encouraged independent thinking about the “basic social and economic problems of agriculture” and helped agricultural workers to have a “more unified view of the nation’s problems.” Schools were also designed to help educators develop a deeper understanding of their work:

“...to help agricultural workers to a more unified view of the nation’s problems and to a strong sense of the meaning of their routine activities, to increase understanding of the forces that have converged in present agricultural programs and policies, and to lay a base for agricultural land-use planning activities. In other words, the Schools present an invitation to philosophy, an invitation to probing personal thinking-through of the root problems we face as individuals and as a nation: Where are we? How did we get here?”<sup>440</sup>

For Taeusch, Schools encouraged participants to ask fundamental questions about their work and the meaning behind their work with citizens. But such a positive and

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<sup>439</sup> ———, “Schools of Philosophy for Farmers,” 1116.

<sup>440</sup> ———, “Preface,” i.

productive view of Schools was not always the case. Of the first eight states where the Schools took place, only four asked the PSD to return.<sup>441</sup>

After a fine-tuning of the format and manner in which content was presented, Schools expanded widely, reaching 39 states by 1940.<sup>442</sup> The early criticism helped to develop what Taeusch and the rest of the PSD staff attempted to do through Schools. Reflecting a more positive experience, a number of states were “repeats” for the program, sometimes multiple times over. In total, 150 Schools were held, each being attended by “some two hundred and fifty persons, with an average of some fifteen afternoon discussion groups.” But the impact of the Schools went well beyond the confines of the four-day conferences when the 35,000 farm leaders who participated “returned home to take part in local community discussion groups that involved a total of some three million people.”<sup>443</sup> Schools were intimately connected with discussion groups both with respect to the structure of the afternoon sessions of the Schools (or immediately after lectures, depending on the particular program) as well as being educational opportunities for Extension agents and other rural leaders to develop their understanding of issues and techniques. Again, we look to Michigan to more fully understand the work of the PSD at the state and local level.

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<sup>441</sup> ———, *Report on the Schools of Philosophy for Agricultural Leaders*, 4.

<sup>442</sup> Successfully planning and executing this number of Schools required Taeusch and others within the PSD to maintain very tight travel schedules. They maintained correspondence internally with others in the PSD for scheduling issues as well as with those in the states hosting Schools. E.g. A. Drummond Jones, "Letter to C. V. Ballard, June 20, 1938," Record Group 83, Box 623, Entry 19, Folder "Schools - Michigan", The Records of the Office of the Secretary of Agriculture, National Archives; Morris B. Storer, "Letter to Carl F. Taeusch, June 27, 1938," Record Group 83, Box 623, Entry 19, Folder "Schools - Michigan", The Records of the Office of the Secretary of Agriculture, National Archives.

<sup>443</sup> Carl F. Taeusch, "Freedom of Assembly," *Ethics* 63, no. 1 (1952): 41.

### *Schools in Michigan*

When William F. Johnston—the State Discussion Group Leader for Michigan State College Cooperative Extension—retired at the end of June 1938, the future for discussion groups might have seemed uncertain. The PSD reached out to the director of Michigan State College Extension, R. J. Baldwin, to make sure discussion groups and Schools would continue: “In view of the retirement of Mr. Johnston, we are naturally much interested in knowing your plans for discussion work throughout the State in the coming months.”<sup>444</sup> Planning had already begun for the fall of 1938 and the PSD wanted to make sure that Johnston’s commitment and energy in the previous years would continue into the future.

Following a School in June 1938, A. Drummond Jones of the PSD wrote to Baldwin and C. V. Ballard of Michigan State College.<sup>445</sup> He said it was his privilege to work with Extension agents at the School in Lansing and that the meeting “stimulated [his] thinking in many ways.” He expressed hope that administrators at Michigan State would want to continue working with the PSD in the future.<sup>446</sup> A few days later Ballard, State Leader of County Agents, responded to Jones thanking him for that School he conducted for county agents in June. Ballard expressed optimism

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<sup>444</sup> A. Drummond Jones, "Letter to R. J. Baldwin, May 20, 1938," Record Group 83, Box 623, Entry 19, Folder "Schools - Michigan", The Records of the Office of the Secretary of Agriculture, National Archives.

<sup>445</sup> In anticipation of the 1937 Short Course for County Agricultural Agents, Johnston wrote to Jones asking if he might be able to come and help agents by demonstrating the discussion method.” See William F. Johnston, "Letter to A. Drummond Jones, February 25, 1937," Record Group 83, Box 623, Entry 19, Folder "Schools - Michigan", The Records of the Office of the Secretary of Agriculture, National Archives.

<sup>446</sup> A. Drummond Jones, "Letter to R. J. Baldwin, July 6, 1938," Record Group 83, Box 623, Entry 19, Folder "Schools - Michigan", The Records of the Office of the Secretary of Agriculture, National Archives; ———, "Letter to C. V. Ballard, July 6, 1938," Record Group 83, Box 623, Entry 19, Folder "Schools - Michigan", The Records of the Office of the Secretary of Agriculture, National Archives.

about the continuation of group discussion. And while Johnston had done much to train agents in discussion methods, Ballard expressed caution and hesitation about the widespread use of group discussion as a teaching method: "To ask extension workers who have been trained in the lecture method of teaching to suddenly change to the group discussion method is something like asking the cheering section to listen to the applause."<sup>447</sup>

Baldwin also wrote back to Jones just weeks after Johnston's retirement. He thanked him for an offer of assistance in "connection with extension enterprises particularly those relative to discussion groups" and suggested they look to that fall as an opportunity for "further attention to this method of teaching." In closing, he expressed gratitude to "Dr. Taeusch and to the others" for the work they had done regarding discussion groups.<sup>448</sup> Attached with Baldwin's letter was a one-page document titled "The County Agents' Summer School" with the initials "R.J.B." at the bottom, presumably from Baldwin. To quote him at length:

"That was the finest school I ever attended," was the expression of many following the June Extension School. Why did we think that way? What was unusual about it? The four days of talks by Dr. Jesness, Dr. Anderson, Dr. Morris, Dr. Maddox, Dr. Nourse and Dr. Taeusch were certainly not filled with light entertainment nor practical material for use in extension projects. Yet many of us liked it. Why?

It was a new, refreshing and stimulating experience to have the broad, background problems of the day presented from an educator's viewpoint. That viewpoint was calm and dispassionate and was offered with due consideration for the opinions of others. There was no rehashing of prejudices but rather a presenting of convictions based

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<sup>447</sup> C. V. Ballard, "Letter to A. Drummond Jones, July 12, 1938," Record Group 83, Box 623, Entry 19, Folder "Schools - Michigan", The Records of the Office of the Secretary of Agriculture, National Archives.

<sup>448</sup> R. J. Baldwin, "Letter to A. Drummond Jones, July 12, 1938," Record Group 83, Box 623, Entry 19, Folder "Schools - Michigan", The Records of the Office of the Secretary of Agriculture, National Archives.

upon long association with specific subjects. These convictions were offered without a touch of the dogmatic attitude of one who has a special interest in forming opinions. The effort was rather to stimulate our responses and our own efforts, and to supplement these with new resources and broader experiences.

As extension workers, we too are educators and we should approach our work from that viewpoint. We should give our people the same consideration as was shown us. It is for us to supply information and inspiration and to stimulate a desire for more knowledge. Not to tell others what to think but to spur them into thinking on the basis of facts is a greater service.”<sup>449</sup>

And while there was praise for the School, Michigan State would step back from its work with the PSD as extensively as before but would, nevertheless, continue to hold leadership training conferences with farmer organizations.<sup>450</sup> But this did not mean the PSD lacked a presence in Michigan. In December of 1939, Loleta Dawson, a librarian, wrote to Taeusch asking “if you and your bureau can help us with an institute for rural library workers during the summer of 1940.” The Michigan Library Association was interested in an institute that would contribute to the “social and economic background of library workers, board members, and citizens interested in obtaining and improving library service in rural areas.” There was, according to Dawson, “a crying need for such continuing education in Michigan, particularly in the upper two-thirds of the state.”<sup>451</sup> All of this was built up since the earliest communication between the Michigan librarians and Jones in the PSD in July 1939.<sup>452</sup> During the first week of

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<sup>449</sup> Ibid.

<sup>450</sup> Alva H. Benton, "Letter to C. L. Nash, August 16, 1940," Record Group 83, Box 591, Entry 19, Folder "Schools - Michigan 1939 to 40", The Records of the Office of the Secretary of Agriculture, National Archives.

<sup>451</sup> Loleta Dawson, "Letter to Carl F. Taeusch, December 22, 1939," Record Group 83, Box 591, Entry 19, Folder "Schools - Michigan 1939 to 40", The Records of the Office of the Secretary of Agriculture, National Archives.

<sup>452</sup> Loleta D. Fyan, "Letter to A. Drummond Jones, July 20, 1939," Record Group 83, Box 591, Entry 19, Folder "Schools - Michigan 1939 to 40", The Records of the Office of the Secretary of Agriculture, National Archives.



August 1940, multiple Michigan Schools for Rural Librarians occurred—the first Schools for librarians, with noted speakers such as Eduard C. Lindeman participating.<sup>453</sup>

The format and content of the Schools explored questions for librarians and were based on the theme of “How can the rural library increase its social contribution?” Much like other Schools elsewhere across the country, the first day dealt with foundational background topics such as “The library and developing problems of a democracy” and “The public library as an educational institution”—both followed by discussion periods. The second day’s morning lectures continued this background theme with “Current economic and social developments confronting rural families” and “Michigan folk music.” The afternoon sessions included two lectured based on the topic of the library and social change with a lecture entitled “Land and learning: the United States and Latin America” followed by a discussion period. The third day had a morning session with topics such as “Directions of educational effort among rural people” and “Developing cultural conditions in American life.” Again, discussion followed the lectures. The final lectures looked forward, framing the topics such as the rural library’s opportunity to play a civic role. These included “The developing challenge for rural libraries” and “The rural librarian’s challenge.”<sup>454</sup>

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<sup>453</sup> Carl F. Taeusch, "Letter to Eduard C. Lindeman, September 4, 1940," Record Group 83, Box 591, Entry 19, Folder "Schools - Michigan 1939 to 40", The Records of the Office of the Secretary of Agriculture, National Archives; "Institute for Librarians Program, Mt Pleasant and Hartland," Record Group 83, Box 591, Entry 19, Folder "Schools - Michigan 1939 to 40", The Records of the Office of the Secretary of Agriculture, National Archives.

<sup>454</sup> "Michigan Schools for Rural Libraries and Library Board Members, 'How Can the Rural Library Increase Its Social Contribution?'," Record Group 83, Box 591, Entry 19, Folder "Schools - Michigan 1939 to 40", The Records of the Office of the Secretary of Agriculture, National Archives.

In a letter from one of the participants in Schools for Rural Librarians to the PSD staff, the purpose and philosophy for Schools as laid out by Wilson and Taeusch was expressed by C. Irene Hayner of the Michigan Library Association in Ann Arbor:

“May I add my note of appreciation for all you did to help make our Michigan library institutes so successful. And I believe they were successful from many points of view. I suppose that’s your job, and why you were chosen for it, but you are certainly an artist in drawing people out. Also I believe you closed the Mt. Pleasant Institute on just the right note—the same one on which the Waldenwoods Institute opened—the need of making our democracy a practical thing—if it is to mean anything at all.”<sup>455</sup>

There was great interest in thinking about and discussing what it meant to be part of a living democracy, something practical and meaningful. For the PSD, this was a positive sign that their work was important and meaningful to those who participated. They did not provide answers, but the PSD helped citizens think about the troubling and important questions of the day.

Just days after receiving this letter from Hayner, Jones wrote to J. H. Kolb in the Department of Rural Sociology at the University of Wisconsin—Madison telling him about the interest and possibility of three Schools for librarians in August of 1941.<sup>456</sup> The *Saginaw News* even ran a story acknowledging the interest in making the Schools an annual affair.<sup>457</sup> Libraries were important resources for rural communities and Schools helped both librarians and others recognize the important civic role of these institutions. In an *American Library Association Bulletin* article, Jones wrote

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<sup>455</sup> C. Irene Hayner, "Letter to A. Drummond Jones, August 14, 1940," Record Group 83, Box 591, Entry 19, Folder "Schools - Michigan 1939 to 40", The Records of the Office of the Secretary of Agriculture, National Archives.

<sup>456</sup> J. H. Kolb, "Agriculture and Rural Life," in *Social Change and the New Deal (Social Changes in 1933)*, ed. William F. Ogburn (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1934).

<sup>457</sup> "Country's Libraries Seen as Democracy Instruments, *The Saginaw News*, August 8, 1940," Record Group 83, Box 591, Entry 19, Folder "Schools - Michigan 1939 to 40", The Records of the Office of the Secretary of Agriculture, National Archives.

about the PSD's relationship with libraries: "The use of books is part of an educational process, Jones wrote, "and we have long since discovered that practices of genuine educational value do not take place merely because we say, 'Come and get it.' We assume, instead, that education is active and that educational agencies must be active." In his view, the librarian had a "distinct opportunity for active participation in an educational process...."<sup>458</sup> Much like Extension's presence in rural counties, libraries were established public institutions where adult education and discussion could occur.

The requests for more Schools in 1941 came to fruition during August of that year.<sup>459</sup> Shortly after a series of Schools, Loleta D. Fyan, Michigan State librarian, wrote to the PSD looking again to future Schools for Michigan librarians. Yet, Taeusch's response highlighted the limitation of a restricted budget, even while he would go on to cite Fyan the following year writing, "A letter from Mrs. Fyan...acclaimed the School as one of the most interesting conferences they have ever held."<sup>460</sup> Requests were "far exceeding [the PSD's] ability to accept" causing "repeat" Schools to have a low priority for the PSD.<sup>461</sup> In fact, according to Alva H. Benton, a staff member of the PSD, the funds for Schools were "severely curtained" because of pressure "from all directions to make use of our funds and time in connection with the defense program." Benton expressed hope that the work they had done with the rural librarians of the state would be "leaven" that would "at some future time bring in not

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<sup>458</sup> Jones, "Farmers Forming Discussion Groups in More Than 40 States," 167-168.

<sup>459</sup> Loleta D. Fyan, "Letter to A. Drummond Jones, February 4, 1941," Record Group 83, Box 591, Entry 19, Folder "Schools - Michigan 1939 to 40", The Records of the Office of the Secretary of Agriculture, National Archives. In this letter, Fyan included a detailed, three-page outline of suggested speakers and topics for their proposed Schools.

<sup>460</sup> Taeusch, "Schools of Philosophy," 479.

<sup>461</sup> ———, "Letter to Loleta D. Fyan, October 10, 1941," Record Group 83, Box 591, Entry 19, Folder "Schools - Michigan 1939 to 40", The Records of the Office of the Secretary of Agriculture, National Archives.

only representatives of the Michigan Library Association but a cross section of all groups working for the advancement of people in rural areas.”<sup>462</sup> But energies—and importantly, resources—were shifting away from such efforts.

With the war effort building up, Schools were being cut back but not eradicated.<sup>463</sup> In fact, the Michigan Farm Bureau expressed interest in a School since it had been using discussion groups with its members and found it to be worthwhile.<sup>464</sup> Benton wrote to Keith Tanner, director of Membership Relations and Education of the Michigan Farm Bureau, laying out the PSD’s approach and goals: “We have two objectives in view: one, that the speakers that we could bring in would bring new points of view, and two, that the leaders of the discussion groups would not only get some additional training, but could put new ideas into actual practice.”<sup>465</sup> Benton worked with Tanner from the Farm Bureau and also with Nash, the Extension

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<sup>462</sup> Alva H. Benton, "Letter to Loleta D. Fyan, October 14, 1941," Record Group 83, Box 591, Entry 19, Folder "Schools - Michigan 1939 to 40", The Records of the Office of the Secretary of Agriculture, National Archives.

<sup>463</sup> Carl F. Taeusch, "Statement on Program of the Division of Program Study and Discussion for the Year 1942," Record Group 83, Box 535, Entry 19, Folder "Division of Program Study and Discussion", The Records of the Office of the Secretary of Agriculture, National Archives, 7-9. Such groups included the Michigan Country Life Association, Rural Urban Conference, and Farm People, among others. The State Board of Control for Vocational Education, which oversaw agricultural teachers, expressed interest in a School for agricultural teachers relative to the war effort. See Harry E. Nesman, "Letter to Morris B. Storer, November 4, 1941," Record Group 83, Box 591, Entry 19, Folder "Schools - Michigan 1942 to Date", The Records of the Office of the Secretary of Agriculture, National Archives; Morris B. Storer, "Letter to Harry E. Nesman, May 22, 1942," Record Group 83, Box 591, Entry 19, Folder "Schools - Michigan 1942 to Date", The Records of the Office of the Secretary of Agriculture, National Archives; Harry E. Nesman, "Letter to Morris B. Storer, May 27, 1942," Record Group 83, Box 591, Entry 19, Folder "Schools - Michigan 1942 to Date", The Records of the Office of the Secretary of Agriculture, National Archives.

<sup>464</sup> Alva H. Benton, "Letter to C. L. Nash, May 5, 1942," Record Group 83, Box 591, Entry 19, Folder "Schools - Michigan 1942 to Date", The Records of the Office of the Secretary of Agriculture, National Archives.

<sup>465</sup> ———, "Letter to Keith Tanner, April 23, 1942."

specialist who had taken over group discussion work for Michigan State after the retirement of Johnston.<sup>466</sup>

Michigan communities continued to be actively engaged with discussion groups and Schools for the foreseeable future, although it would continue to be seen as a marginal effort when compared with the more traditional role and mission of Extension and Michigan State overall.<sup>467</sup> This sense of purpose and mission was a critical issue, one that would ripple throughout the land-grant system and the USDA.

The next chapter steps back slightly to go into greater depth about the development of the PSD and its elevation within the USDA, the Department's attempt to smooth over some of the longstanding tensions that emerged at the beginning of the New Deal with land-grant colleges and Extension, and the articulated philosophy of two important figures: M. L. Wilson and Carl F. Taeusch.

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<sup>466</sup> ———, "Letter to Keith Tanner, May 5, 1942," Record Group 83, Box 591, Entry 19, Folder "Schools - Michigan 1942 to Date", The Records of the Office of the Secretary of Agriculture, National Archives; Keith A. Tanner, "Letter to Alva Benton, May 12, 1942," Record Group 83, Box 591, Entry 19, Folder "Schools - Michigan 1942 to Date", The Records of the Office of the Secretary of Agriculture, National Archives.

<sup>467</sup> In his history about the first century of Michigan State University's existence, Madison Kuhn made a brief comment about discussion groups during this period of time. "Discussion groups were encouraged and discussion leaders were trained because the device proved effective in mobilizing community sentiment in favor of better living as well as better farming." Madison Kuhn, *Michigan State: The First Hundred Years, 1855-1955* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1955), 386.

## CHAPTER 5

### THE OTHER SIDE OF MT. WEATHER: AGRICULTURAL PLANNING AND CULTURAL APPROACHES TO DEMOCRACY

“Even among the best-informed citizens there is little understanding of modern government. Perhaps one would assert that he understands America except in the sense of knowing certain aspects of the nation’s life. One may know one’s community, one’s state, one may read much and travel widely through the country, and still feel humble about one’s grasp of what makes this nation what it is. The organized government comprehends in some way, it impinges upon and is affected by, practically everything that exists or moves in our society. It involves policies and actions of immense complexity. Its fullest possible understanding requires the wisdom of the anthropologist, the historian, the economist, the sociologist, the political scientist, the farmer, the laborer, the merchant, the industrialist, the banker, the politician, the philosopher, and many more.” – Paul H. Appleby<sup>468</sup>

“There is in fact no distinction between the fate of the land and the fate of the people. When one is abused, the other suffers.” – Wendell Berry<sup>469</sup>

#### *Mt. Weather and Agricultural Planning*

While discussion groups continued and Schools increased in popularity for both Extension and other organizations, the USDA was going through a transformation. Rexford Tugwell moved from his position of Under Secretary to become Director of the Farm Security Administration in January 1937, creating an opening in Wallace’s administration. A familiar administrator elsewhere in the USDA stepped up to this role: M. L. Wilson.

His appointment to Under Secretary was similar to when he was previously appointed as Assistant Secretary: one reason for his elevation to this role was to heal “the wounds” the USDA had afflicted on many farmers through some of the

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<sup>468</sup> Paul H. Appleby, *Big Democracy* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1945), vi.

<sup>469</sup> Wendell Berry, “It All Turns on Affection,” *2012 Jefferson Lecturer* (John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts: National Endowment for the Humanities, 2012).

(sometimes contradictory) New Deal agricultural programs. Additionally, he was charged with ending the “growing hostility of the extension service toward the USDA,” a tension that stemmed from the early days of the AAA because of the way in which the USDA deployed its own field agents rather than relying on Extension agents. Wallace placed Wilson in charge of a committee charged with the task to “both to uncover the areas of conflict between the USDA and extension service and to plan a program to end the problems.”<sup>470</sup>

Much of the conflict stemmed from changes in the relationship between the USDA and Extension at the hands of Tolley, the head of the Planning Division. He sought to reduce the role of Extension in the administration of the Department’s broadly defined “farm program.” The AAA, Soil Conservation Service, and Farm Security Administration had each established large regional offices, unintentionally bringing confusion to farmers because they would occasionally receive conflicting advice from these various agencies.<sup>471</sup>

The election of 1936 “began a titanic struggle,” in the words of Christiana M. Campbell, between the USDA and the Farm Bureau with the role of Extension being at the heart of this strained relationship. The Department was trying to shift away from a reliance on Extension for the local administration of farm programs to its own staff.<sup>472</sup> Nevertheless, Extension was still playing a role in the administration of the AAA, although this varied somewhat by region. In the South, for example, Extension remained central to the composition of county committee membership for farm

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<sup>470</sup> McDean, “M. L. Wilson and Agricultural Reform in Twentieth Century America”, 468-469.

<sup>471</sup> Charles M. Hardin, *Freedom in Agricultural Education* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1955), 17.

<sup>472</sup> Campbell, *The Farm Bureau and the New Deal*, 156.

programs. Without seeking to explicitly separate Extension from the AAA, Tolley wanted an increased role for farmers, “to become more important in planning and administering the program...and he wanted the election of county committees to become the universal practice.” Such efforts, however, put Tolley’s vision for the Department in tension with Extension and its supporters, namely the Farm Bureau.<sup>473</sup>

The tension between the Planning Division and Extension would reach a precipice in 1938 when Tolley “suddenly took the state administration of the Triple-A away from the state extension services and set up separate state and county offices.”<sup>474</sup> The reaction to this was mixed.<sup>475</sup> Some land-grant administrators felt they were freed from the responsibility of continuing to administer action programs and return fully to research and education. Others, particularly those in the South, believed Extension should continue to administer the programs and resisted this change. The concern expressed by these individuals within the colleges and Extension was that they would now be in a competition of sorts with the “service and ‘action programs’ of the Department.”<sup>476</sup> Relations got so bad that the Association of Land-Grant Colleges and Universities and the USDA established committees on federal-state relations in an attempt to both understand and work through the challenges of maintaining supportive partnerships. These committees would continue as part of the Association’s annual meeting even after the immediate storm passed. This was necessary because, “the too-

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<sup>473</sup> Kirkendall, *Social Scientists and Farm Politics in the Age of Roosevelt*, 153. On the dynamics of regionalism and the tension between the USDA and the Farm Bureau/extension service, see Campbell, *The Farm Bureau and the New Deal*, 156-195.

<sup>474</sup> Kirkendall, *Social Scientists and Farm Politics in the Age of Roosevelt*, 153.

<sup>475</sup> Wilson, "Reminiscences of Milburn Lincoln Wilson," 2010-2011.

<sup>476</sup> Edgar John Boone and James Kincaid Jr., "Historical Perspective of the Programming Function," in *The Cooperative Extension Service*, ed. H. C. Sanders (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1966), 91.



extensive conception that national-state relations constituted [was] an area for conflict rather than for collaboration.”<sup>477</sup>

By early 1938, Wilson’s committee developed a proposal for a planning project that envisioned an organization that could conduct agricultural land-use planning and could provide “a proper adjustment of relations between the department and the colleges and could coordinate the department’s action programs.” The proposal circulated within the Department and among college administrators. Concerns and questions remained about the relationship between the federal government and the states. The next step was a meeting on July 7 and 8 at Mt. Weather, Virginia, to obtain formal approval and wider acceptance of the proposal Wilson’s committee produced.<sup>478</sup>

Mt. Weather was 60 to 70 miles outside of Washington in the Blue Ridge Mountains and had been established by the Weather Bureau earlier in the century, although its use had changed. There were a few two-story brick buildings and a laboratory. A few years before the meeting, Mt. Weather had been converted into a place for USDA conferences and seminars, with cots and basic kitchen utensils on hand. It was simple but sufficient. “Think sessions,” to use Wilson’s terminology, had

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<sup>477</sup> Kirkendall, *Social Scientists and Farm Politics in the Age of Roosevelt*, 155; M. L. Wilson, “Federal-State Relationships in Agriculture,” in *Proceedings of the Association of Land-Grant Colleges and Universities: Fifty-Third Annual Convention, Washington, DC, November 15-17, 1939*, ed. William L. Slate (New Haven, CT: Quinnipiac Press, 1940); John M. Gaus, Leon O. Wolcott, and Verne B. Lewis, *Public Administration and the United States Department of Agriculture* (Chicago: Published for the Committee on Public Administration of the Social Science Research Council by Public Administration Service, 1940), 157.

<sup>478</sup> Kirkendall, *Social Scientists and Farm Politics in the Age of Roosevelt*, 156, 157.

been held there throughout the 1930s, so the gathering of Department and land-grant officials was not something out of the ordinary for this mountain retreat.<sup>479</sup>

The Mt. Weather Agreement, as it would come to be known, established planning organizations and procedures for the USDA, land-grant colleges, and Extension. It was broadly recognized as a “way out of a difficult situation” for these institutions.<sup>480</sup> Helping alleviate some of the increasing tensions between the Department and the states (i.e. the land-grant institutions and Extension Services more specifically), the agreement was seen by land-grant administrators as a way to reestablish the kind of relationship between the federal government and the colleges that had existed before the New Deal and its subsequent action programs.<sup>481</sup>

This agreement, some five years in the making, began with more than a dozen and numerous minor agricultural laws that were passed related to agriculture and its role in the broader economy. Prior to 1933, farmers and others in rural communities could expect the work of the USDA, Experiment Stations, land-grant colleges, and Extension Service to be communicated by Extension agents. With the implementation of New Deal legislation and its corresponding work, this somewhat straightforward approach to agricultural problems was made more complex with new agencies and bureaucratic structures.<sup>482</sup> The Mt. Weather Agreement sought to wed this

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<sup>479</sup> Wilson, "Reminiscences of Milburn Lincoln Wilson," 2019-2020.

<sup>480</sup> John D. Lewis, "Democratic Planning in Agriculture, I," *The American Political Science Review* 35, no. 2 (1941): 240; Kirkendall, *Social Scientists and Farm Politics in the Age of Roosevelt*, 160. For the text of the Mt. Weather Agreement, see Gaus, Wolcott, and Lewis, *Public Administration and the United States Department of Agriculture*, 463-465.

<sup>481</sup> Wilson, "Reminiscences of Milburn Lincoln Wilson," 2029.

<sup>482</sup> M. S. Eisenhower, "Who Should Be Responsible in the Development of an Agricultural Planning Program?," in *Proceedings of the Association of Land-Grant Colleges and Universities: Fifty-Second Annual Convention, Chicago, Illinois, November 14-16, 1938*, ed. William L. Slate (New Haven, CT: Quinnipiac Press, 1939), 118, 119.

foundational practice of Extension's previous work with the then current approach of having a national land-use planning program—comprised of citizens as well as those from the USDA and land-grant institutions making decisions about their local communities that would have state and national implications.<sup>483</sup>

Walking away from Mt. Weather, the USDA and land-grant institutions stated their intention to “cooperate in establishing democratic, cooperative procedures and institutions that would give farm people an effective voice in formulating, correlating, and localizing public agricultural programs.”<sup>484</sup> It was, in the words of William J. Block, to “supposedly” reduce friction between colleges and the action agencies.<sup>485</sup> Supporters saw participatory planning as the best way to democratize the agricultural policy process and to counter growing domination by a powerful conservative coalition shaped, in many ways, by the Farm Bureau.<sup>486</sup> Wilson called Mt. Weather an “appropriate arrangement,” recognizing the chasm that had formed and the challenges to bridging it.<sup>487</sup>

The USDA was a national resource and tool of the people, according to Wilson, and it needed to be responsive to public needs and views. While sharing some similarities with earlier New Deal efforts, this idea of an agricultural planning effort was novel with its emphasis on planning and the role of farmers deliberating about and policy decisions that had real implications for their own communities as well as the

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<sup>483</sup> For background on Mt. Weather Agreement see Kirkendall, *Social Scientists and Farm Politics in the Age of Roosevelt*, 157-164; Loss, *Between Citizens and the State*, 67-68.

<sup>484</sup> Eisenhower, "Who Should Be Responsible in the Development of an Agricultural Planning Program?," 119.

<sup>485</sup> Block, *The Separation of the Farm Bureau and the Extension Service*, 22. But as we will see, the tensions continued and failed to overcome these early challenges

<sup>486</sup> Gilbert, "Democratic Planning in Agricultural Policy," 233.

<sup>487</sup> M. L. Wilson, "The New Department of Agriculture," *Address before the Annual Meeting of the Texas Agricultural Workers Association* (Fort Worth, TX, 1939), 12.

nation.<sup>488</sup> It was a formal partnership among “an entire economic group (farmers), administrators, and scientists, aiming to shape and reform public policy.”<sup>489</sup> For Wilson, agricultural planning was, “a point of departure in rural education” and it offered a new opportunity to rethink the relationship between educators and the educated.<sup>490</sup> Extension agreed that the action programs of the USDA would continue to be “the fundamental responsibility of the federal agencies, while research and education would be the chief responsibilities of the Extension Services.”<sup>491</sup> The agreement allowed Extension to shed the administrative and regulatory roles they had taken on with the AAA and return to their educational function.<sup>492</sup> McDean explained the relationship further:

“Local farmers associations and land planning committees would remain democratic, with the farmers organizing associations on their own, choosing their own land-use and farm programs. The Extension Services, however, were given the task of coordinating the activities of the local associations and committees. The state extension services were to appoint one planning committee in each county of their respective states, and they were to appoint one state planning board in

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<sup>488</sup> Taeusch spoke of the use of discussion methods as the “best means of establishing a continuous rapport between the administrative agencies of government and those whom they are expected to serve and govern.” Taeusch, “Adequate Perspectives,” 413. See also Jewett, “The Social Sciences, Philosophy, and the Cultural Turn in the 1930s USDA,” 403-404.

<sup>489</sup> Gilbert, “Democratic Planning in Agricultural Policy,” 233. Gilbert notes the planning project has not been well studied, and it is his own scholarship that is some of the most current research on the topic. Historically, there are a handful of important works focused on this period and this project. These include: Kirkendall, *Social Scientists and Farm Politics in the Age of Roosevelt*; Ellen Sorge Parks, “Experiment in the Democratic Planning of Public Agricultural Activity” (Doctoral Dissertation, University of Wisconsin, 1947); Bushrod W. Allin, “County Planning Project—a Cooperative Approach to Agricultural Planning,” *Journal of Farm Economics* 22, no. 1 (1940); Lewis, “Democratic Planning in Agriculture, I.”; ———, “Democratic Planning in Agriculture, II,” *The American Political Science Review* 35, no. 3 (1941); David E. Hamilton, “Building the Associative State: The Department of Agriculture and American State-Building,” *Agricultural History* 64, no. 2 (1990); Bryce Ryan, “Democratic Tesis and County Agricultural Planning,” *Journal of Farm Economics* 22, no. 4 (1940). For a brief article about the end of county planning, see Neal C. Gross, “A Post Mortem on County Planning,” *Journal of Farm Economics* 25, no. 3 (1943).

<sup>490</sup> Wilson, “Reminiscences of Milburn Lincoln Wilson,” 1997.

<sup>491</sup> McDean, “M. L. Wilson and Agricultural Reform in Twentieth Century America,” 470.

<sup>492</sup> Donald J. Blackburn and Joan Flaherty, “Historical Roots,” in *Extension Handbook: Processes and Practices*, ed. Donald J. Blackburn (Toronto: Thompson Educational Publishing, 1994), 4.

each state. The county and state committees were to correlate the programs of the local farmers associations and committees.”<sup>493</sup>

In a document jointly published by the various agencies within the USDA, the land-use planning program was recognized as an essential piece in the evolving work of the Department. “Like the chapter of any continued story,” the document read, “county land use planning can be understood only in light of what went before it.”<sup>494</sup> The USDA believed in cooperative relationships among various groups:

“the method of discussion and mutual agreement is most likely to get the desired coordination and has the best chance to endure. So the answer was that coordination of action could best be obtained through the joint participation of the farmers, the technicians, and the administrators in cooperative planning. That is to say, the planning for public farm policies and programs should represent the opinions that have been formed by farmers with the advice and help of the experts. As it has been put by H. R. Tolley, Chief of the Bureau of Agricultural Economics, ‘The expert must be the counselor, the citizen the one who decides.’”<sup>495</sup>

In October 1938, Wallace reorganized the USDA to implement the agreement made at Mt. Weather.<sup>496</sup> This was part of a major effort to address land-use problems.<sup>497</sup> The BAE, an agency established by Henry C. Wallace in 1922, was to become the central planning agency for the Department.

Secretary Henry A. Wallace had been looking for a way, as early as 1935, to address and coordinate the land-use problem afflicting farmers, but had struggled to

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<sup>493</sup> McDean, “M. L. Wilson and Agricultural Reform in Twentieth Century America”, 470.

<sup>494</sup> Bureau of Agricultural Economics et al., *Land Use Planning under Way*, 2.

<sup>495</sup> Ibid., 3.

<sup>496</sup> Gaus, Wolcott, and Lewis, *Public Administration and the United States Department of Agriculture*, 466-484; Gilbert, “Democratic Planning in Agricultural Policy,” 240. For a brief overview of the Mt. Weather Agreement and the reorganization of the USDA, see Baker et al., *Century of Service: The First 100 Years of the United States Department of Agriculture*, 257-261.

<sup>497</sup> Kirkendall, *Social Scientists and Farm Politics in the Age of Roosevelt*, 150; Gilbert, “Democratic Planning in Agricultural Policy.”

define what that would be or how it would function.<sup>498</sup> But with Mt. Weather, there was a way forward acceptable to the various parties involved. The foundation of the plan was for farmers to organize and participate in local planning and to “bring their knowledge of local conditions to bear upon national programs.”<sup>499</sup> What this meant for the various action agencies, however, became an important and volatile question, leading to more conflicts between these other agencies and the BAE.<sup>500</sup> Wallace wrote in the memorandum describing the reorganization of the USDA:

“For a quarter of a century the State Extension Services and the Department have fostered local planning by farmers. With the beginning of the present action programs, the Department sought to have farmer-participation not only in the administration of the programs themselves but also in the necessary planning work back of the programs. The Agricultural Adjustment Administration and the Land Grant Colleges have given increased attention to this since 1935.”<sup>501</sup>

Wallace continued by acknowledging the work taking place between the USDA and the colleges because of the Mt. Weather agreement and their intention to cooperate in establishing democratic and cooperative procedures that would give farm people, in Wallace’s words, “...an effective voice in formulating, correlating, and localizing public agricultural programs.”<sup>502</sup>

Agricultural planning was an important approach to agricultural problems because the issues facing rural citizens were best addressed as a “complex of

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<sup>498</sup> With respect to the county land-use planning project, Wallace reached out to Wilson. In 1935, Wilson served as chairperson of the Land Policy Committee in the USDA and later, in 1937, Wilson would be part of a larger group of advisors for the Office of Land-Use Coordination. See Kirkendall, *Social Scientists and Farm Politics in the Age of Roosevelt*, 150-151.

<sup>499</sup> Gaus, Wolcott, and Lewis, *Public Administration and the United States Department of Agriculture*, 157.

<sup>500</sup> Kirkendall, *Social Scientists and Farm Politics in the Age of Roosevelt*, 168.

<sup>501</sup> Gaus, Wolcott, and Lewis, *Public Administration and the United States Department of Agriculture*, 468.

<sup>502</sup> Ibid.

interrelated factors.” Such an approach required that experts and citizens both contribute to the work accordingly. As Wallace stated, “Farmers need the help that specialists can provide, and specialists must draw on the experience and judgments of farmers.” With its Secretary making such a statement, what the USDA needed to do was provide for an integrated and unified planning effort that both professionals within the government and colleges and farmers in their own communities could use as a guide to all public agricultural programs.<sup>503</sup> Others shared Wallace’s vision within the Department. Wilson spoke about land-use efforts in this way:

“First of all, as a result of this inventory and the research work and so on, a kind of master plan for land-use would develop as far as the state was concerned. That would be broken down as far as the counties were concerned, and, as these plans developed, the administration of the federal programs of the Department of Agriculture for which Congress supplied the money would, within the limits of the law, adjust their program and administration to the plans that were developed in this planning activity.”<sup>504</sup>

This plan “not only represented a most significant effort to democratize the administration of national farm programs but helped tie securely at both ends the direct lines of administration reaching from the Department to the farmer on his farm.”<sup>505</sup> Wallace’s own words from the memorandum he sent to Department employees following Mt. Weather stated this clearly. He envisioned a way for both experts within the Department and colleges to work alongside farmers in tackling the amorphous “farm problem.” Restructuring the Department would enable state and local planning to reach the Secretary in a “truly significant and usable form....”<sup>506</sup>

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<sup>503</sup> Ibid., 469.

<sup>504</sup> Wilson, “Reminiscences of Milburn Lincoln Wilson,” 2015-2016.

<sup>505</sup> Gaus, Wolcott, and Lewis, *Public Administration and the United States Department of Agriculture*, 158.

<sup>506</sup> Ibid., 469; Kirkendall, *Social Scientists and Farm Politics in the Age of Roosevelt*, 161.

Wallace believed this was a way for national-level agricultural policy to be shaped, in part, by actions taken by farmers in their own communities in conversation with others.<sup>507</sup>

### ***Centralized Planning in the BAE***

The reorganization of the USDA centralized planning in the BAE with H. R. Tolley as its head.<sup>508</sup> At Wilson's suggestion, within a week of becoming chief, Tolley went on a tour of different regions of the country to study and observe the operation of some of the programs which he was not totally familiar with in order to better understand the relationship that existed between the "so-called action agencies of the Department and the land grant colleges, especially the extension services of the land grant colleges."<sup>509</sup> For Tolley, this trip helped him develop ideas for unifying and integrating the various programs of the USDA now under his watch.

The PSD soon moved to the new BAE, leaving behind its home within the AAA, the place it had existed since its origins with that initial meeting during the winter of 1934. Along with the centralization of planning in the BAE, the PSD was

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<sup>507</sup> Walter A. Rowlands, "Land Use Planning in Rural Areas: Discussion," *The Planners' Journal* 5, no. 1 (1939): 18.

<sup>508</sup> Tolley tells of conversation he had with Wallace about his transfer into the position as head of the BAE and, while in a joking manner, demonstrates the unnamed philosophy guiding Wallace's decisions. Tolley said, "When I finally went back to Henry Wallace and told him alright, I'd move over the BAE, we talked some more, but I never did get anything definite from him as to why he was doing this. I remember quite distinctly making two remarks to Henry Wallace at that time. One of them was that if I had it to do over again, I'd do it just the same. The other was that I wore no man's collar. Then we talked about religion a while and I went on home. He probably said something about the great forces that move the world, and the super-human, and so on." H. R. Tolley, "Reminiscences of Howard R. Tolley," *Oral History Collection* (New York: Columbia University, 1954), 462. The appointment of Tolley as chief of the BAE helped address a concern that he was doing a poor job as the head of the AAA and causing issues both within the USDA as well as outside of it. Moving to the BAE aligned with his interests and approaches to democratic planning and allowed Wallace to ameliorate the situation. See Kirkendall, *Social Scientists and Farm Politics in the Age of Roosevelt*, 157-161.

<sup>509</sup> Tolley, "Reminiscences of Howard R. Tolley," 468.



promoted in status to a Division within the Bureau and was further recognized as having an important role to play alongside the more explicit land-use planning efforts of the Bureau. This move was not a shock, especially since the PSD had always been (and would continue to be) somewhat of an outlier within the Department. As David Lachman noted, “The activities of the [PSD] had never been solely tied to AAA anyway, and [PSD’s] work had supported a wide range of USDA programs, particularly planning.” As early as 1935, the discussion groups were closely aligned with county planning projects, in states such as Iowa for example. It made sense, philosophically and practically, that the PSD would be relocated.<sup>510</sup>

Looking back on this period, Tolley spoke about the PSD as an “innovation” of citizen participation in democratic planning. It was part of the BAE because, as Tolley would later reflect, “we felt there was need for free and frank and intelligent discussion by farm people of both local and national problems and programs. We decided that we should try to help organize local discussion groups to encourage these local county committees to resolve themselves into discussion groups at meetings, to discuss current problems.”<sup>511</sup> As part of this centralized planning hub, Tolley wanted to ensure that farmers were thinking about and discussing issues affecting them as deliberatively as possible.

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<sup>510</sup> Lachman, "Democratic Ideology and Agricultural Policy "Program Study and Discussion" in the U.S. Department of Agriculture, 1934-1946", 39.

<sup>511</sup> Tolley, "Reminiscences of Howard R. Tolley," 473.

After the transition to Division status, the PSD played a role in discussion-leader trainings for counties for the larger county land-use project.<sup>512</sup> But this role put the PSD in tension with its former home because county land-use planning committees were a concern for the AAA and Soil Conservation Service, another one of the USDA's New Deal programs. That was because they had their own county committees and they were fearful the new land-use planning committees might become dominant.<sup>513</sup> In fact, little alleviated the tensions especially as AAA leaders viewed Schools as "agencies of propaganda and doubted that they could make important contributions to the farm program."<sup>514</sup>

While the PSD was not directly connected with other Divisions of the BAE, its work did provide important resources for others, aside from the concerns expressed above. These included the Division of Farm Population and Rural Welfare, the Farm Credit Administration, the Farm Security Administration, the Federal Surplus Commodities Corporation, the Forest Service, the Soil Conservation Service, the Weather Bureau, and the Bureaus of Animal, Plant, and Dairy Industries.<sup>515</sup> Additionally, Schools were only very loosely connected to land-use planning in most cases, with increased efforts to bring the discussion group work of the PSD into the

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<sup>512</sup> Carl F. Taeusch, "Letter Sent to All Division Field Men, July 18, 1940," Record Group 83, Box 577, Entry 19, Folder "Program Study and Discussion", The Records of the Office of the Secretary of Agriculture, National Archives.

<sup>513</sup> Kirkendall, *Social Scientists and Farm Politics in the Age of Roosevelt*, 169.

<sup>514</sup> *Ibid.*, 170.

<sup>515</sup> Morris B. Storer, "Memorandum to Members of Program Study and Discussion Division, November 4, 1939," Record Group 83, Box 577, Entry 19, Folder "Program Study and Discussion", The Records of the Office of the Secretary of Agriculture, National Archives; H. R. Tolley, *Report of the Chief of the Bureau of Agricultural Economics, 1940* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1941), 63; Lachman, "Democratic Ideology and Agricultural Policy "Program Study and Discussion" in the U.S. Department of Agriculture, 1934-1946", 40.

land-use committees so that they might function more democratically and deliberatively.<sup>516</sup>

Taeusch noted in a memo to Eric Englund, who briefly served as acting chief of the BAE, that the PSD's work was primarily educational both for farmers as well as for Department staff who could often view agricultural issues predominantly in technical or economic ways. The work of the Schools, in this case, was to provide a better understanding of common problems and to provide "a clearer view of the interrelation of all activities of the Department."<sup>517</sup> The PSD was not a research agency nor was it beholden to any particular agency. As Taeusch stated:

"...the schools and discussion groups sponsored by the Department are not connected with any action agencies, and only indirectly even with the planning groups, results in a considerable interval of time between these educational conferences and any action which may result from them. During that interval, the critical and reflective processes of the human mind, which are especially characteristic of farm people, have ample time to become operative."<sup>518</sup>

Instead, the PSD sought to "bring to public attention the broader subject-matter involved in these problems and policies."<sup>519</sup> Because there was not a general department of education and public education was primarily oriented toward urban

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<sup>516</sup> Harold A. Vogel and Morris B. Storer, "Memorandum to Conferees Re: Bidivisional Conference: State and Local Planning and Program Study and Discussion," Record Group 83, Box 577, Entry 19, Folder "Program Study and Discussion", The Records of the Office of the Secretary of Agriculture, National Archives, 5; "Copy of Suggested Letter to State B.A.E. Representatives," Record Group 83, Box 535, Entry 19, Folder "Division of Program Study and Discussion", The Records of the Office of the Secretary of Agriculture, National Archives.

<sup>517</sup> Carl F. Taeusch, "Reply to Eric Englund Memorandum Request of June 8, 1940, June 12, 1940," Record Group 83, Box 577, Entry 19, Folder "Program Study and Discussion", The Records of the Office of the Secretary of Agriculture, National Archives, 2.

<sup>518</sup> ———, "Schools of Philosophy for Farmers," 1119.

<sup>519</sup> ———, "Memorandum to H. R. Tolley, Rough Draft," Record Group 83, Box 577, Entry 19, Folder "Program Study and Discussion", The Records of the Office of the Secretary of Agriculture, National Archives.

settings, it seemed “a new type of rural education [was] ripe for development.”<sup>520</sup> The adult education work of the Department was based on the then present state of democracy in contrast to earlier American history, requiring:

“special emphasis in this adult-education program be placed upon the need for cooperation rather than up the type of freedom which was characteristic of the frontier era.... We still hold to the concept of democracy, but we have now a growing realization that in an age of intimate and increasing interdependence there must be a change in the means by which that end is to be attained.”<sup>521</sup>

Shifting to such a broad, cultural focus required a reorientation for many in the USDA, especially those who had long focused on their discrete efforts to address one piece of the immense farm problem without giving too much attention to what might otherwise seem disconnected from one’s own concerns. Leading the charge for such an embrace was M. L. Wilson.

### *A Cultural Shift: Wilson and Taeusch on Democracy*

It was during this period in the late 1930s that Wilson and Taeusch most clearly articulated their understanding of the democratic educational work they had helped shape since that initial meeting in 1934 when they explored the possibility of using deliberative forums and adult education as a way to respond to the needs of rural men and women. Importantly, they continued to express and embody a spirit and energy from the early period of the New Deal that was, as McDean suggested, dying all around them.<sup>522</sup> In what follows below, we look closely at a few key publications from both Wilson and Taeusch.

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<sup>520</sup> ———, “Philosophy Conference on Agriculture” (paper presented at the Philosophy Conference on Agriculture, Washington, DC, May 29, 1939), 6.

<sup>521</sup> Ibid., 10.

<sup>522</sup> McDean, “M. L. Wilson and Agricultural Reform in Twentieth Century America”, 463.

***M. L. Wilson***

In the spring of 1939, Wilson convened a series of conferences on the social sciences he felt were most relevant to agricultural problems. The first conference was held in early April and looked at agricultural problems from a philosophical standpoint, paying particular attention to adult education in relation to the PSD's discussion groups and Schools. A second conference was held later that month, with a focus on the role of political science, especially in relation to the recently reorganized BAE. The third conference focused on cultural anthropology, taking place in mid-May. Its theme was farm problems being social and economic in nature. Subsequently, there were conferences on history, social psychology, and rural sociology.<sup>523</sup>

In a document produced from the cultural anthropology conference, Robert Redfield, dean and professor at the University of Chicago, responded to Wilson's invitation to begin that conference's conversation and spoke about the interconnectedness of culture. He said:

“It seems to me that if you examine the way of life of people living in a community, you discover that one aspect of life has meaning only in relation to other aspects of their life. You may start anywhere examining the network of habits, customs, traditions, and you find soon that however limited you may have thought the segment of life you began with, as you study it you necessarily run farther and farther into the fabric of culture, until eventually you are enmeshed in the whole.”<sup>524</sup>

The anthropologists compared and contrasted their work in “primitive” societies to that of the “complex” United States and saw the ability of the former to live more

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<sup>523</sup> Baker et al., *Century of Service: The First 100 Years of the United States Department of Agriculture*, 239.

<sup>524</sup> "Culture and Agriculture: Cultural Anthropology Conference, May 17-19, 1939," (Washington, DC: Bureau of Agricultural Economics, 1939), 3.

democratically than modern Americans did in their “partial democracy.” Wilson’s interest in the discussion becomes evident when he notes the importance of the terminology cultural anthropology:

“‘Anthropology’ gives perspective in its suggestions of a view of mankind. It suggests consciousness of man’s long past, and where man came from, and in doing so ought to dispel static notions that man was always, and always will be, just as he is today. The word ‘cultural’ suggests to me the emphasis upon culture, the attention to the whole of man’s life and traditions and customs—without breaking man’s activities up into artificial compartments—that is the essence of the point of view of cultural anthropology.”

For Wilson, the problems facing rural America required an increasingly wider view of the relationships among the multiple variables that constituted the “farm problem.” As the discussion among the scholars drew to a close, there was a conversation about the role of the anthropologist and one’s ability to speak to values in a society. After a lively exchange about the importance of functioning as a scientist and leaving one’s personal judgment and values aside, Wilson agreed with one of the participants who expressed his belief that scientific methods can apply to the analysis of values since you “cannot avoid attention to values in varying forms.” “But to declare one value better than another value in a culture,” the participant continued, “would mean specifically to intrude your personal judgment.... It might be proper for the philosopher to discuss values...but not [for us] as cultural anthropologists.” Wilson’s response is telling: “To me, the problem of values is over in the field of philosophy and religion. And in the determination of which values are best, which values we want, and which values we shall pursue, we must function as philosophers, as religious believers, and above all as citizens—not as scientists.” Wilson’s interest in

multiple disciplines, with cultural anthropology as one example, never reduced his commitment to looking at problems through philosophical and civic lenses.<sup>525</sup>

Stemming from this conference and others like it, Wilson supported a cultural approach to agricultural issues because, as Kirkendall has noted, “the planner needed to know much more than what appeared rational from an economist’s point of view. He had to understand the customs, traditions, and values of the particular people with whom he worked.”<sup>526</sup> “The core of any culture is the value system,” Wilson wrote, and “[i]t would be difficult to over-emphasize the importance of these value systems. Here are bound together the ideas which give meaning to the activities, the stresses, and strains of everyday life.”<sup>527</sup> Acknowledging values and discussing values was essential for Wilson’s concept of democracy.

But what were Wilson’s most important statements on the interconnected issues of complexity of public problems, the relationships between experts and citizens, and the importance of maintaining a commitment to problem solving and democratic ideals? In 1939, Wilson coauthored a book with O. E. Baker and Ralph Borsodi called *Agriculture in Modern Life* in which each author made what one reviewer called “very distinctive contribution[s] in the way of subject matter and point of view.” While Wilson was critiqued indirectly for not writing in a more analytical and scientific way, his contribution was called the “most cheerful, and most hopeful.” His section was not “heavily documented” and contained within it “few figures” but, as the reviewer noted, “No one could doubt Mr. Wilson’s intimate knowledge of

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<sup>525</sup> Ibid., 12, 19-20, 22-23. In the attached report, a bullet point noted the interest in having lectures and discussions dealing with cultural anthropology as part of Schools.

<sup>526</sup> Kirkendall, *Social Scientists and Farm Politics in the Age of Roosevelt*, 186.

<sup>527</sup> M. L. Wilson, “Cultural Approach in Extension Work,” *Extension Service Circular 332* 1940, 6.

agriculture, either geographically widespread, or reaching back through many years of earlier development.”<sup>528</sup>

The cultural approach to thinking about American agriculture included what Wilson called the tangible materials and intangible and immaterial matters, the tools and techniques of rural life as well as the knowledge and attitudes that animated such a life. The transformation in the preceding decades from a simple life to a modern, complex world invited both opportunity as well as complication. Rural life, in Wilson’s view, was delicately balanced in an “intricate inter-relationship.” If one thing was “disturbed,” to use Wilson’s term, the “whole pattern is forced temporarily out of balance; when finally equilibrium is regained, the complexion of the whole has been changed.”<sup>529</sup>

This line of thinking had broader implications that extended beyond the audience reading *Agriculture in Modern Life*. Wilson was in the middle of the USDA’s efforts attempting to infuse opportunities for citizens to play a more active role in the Department’s work with Extension agents and rural men and women. In a powerful statement, Wilson succinctly stated his belief that issues were immensely complex and it was essential to engage philosophical, moral, and religious questions even when addressing an otherwise apparent technical or economic problem. He wrote:

“...I have always believed that no single specialist or expert, nor any single body of scientific knowledge, can ever deal adequately with even a relatively small and apparently detached agricultural problem. I

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<sup>528</sup> B. H. Hibbard, "Review of Agriculture in Modern Life," *Journal of Farm Economics* 22, no. 1 (1940): 393, 395.

<sup>529</sup> M. L. Wilson, "Patterns of Rural Cultures," in *Agriculture in Modern Life*, ed. O.E. Baker, Ralph Borsodi, and M. L. Wilson (New York: Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1939), 218.



believe that when, for instance, we have a farm problem that seems on the surface to be wholly an economic matter, we may safely take it for granted that the economic problem is interwoven with factors that are political, sociological, psychological, philosophical, and even religious. And we should realize that any solution or policy that is decided upon is bound to have effects upon human life and conduct that none but philosophy and religion openly profess to judge. Economic wisdom alone, therefore, is not enough for proper consideration of agricultural problems that by common consent are defined as economic problems. We cannot escape getting involved in questions of moral, philosophical, and spiritual values whenever we touch upon any social problem.”<sup>530</sup>

For this reason, Wilson viewed a cultural approach to addressing the problems of American agriculture as the most appropriate way forward.<sup>531</sup> Elsewhere, he touched on the importance of knowledge and judgment as well as the need for both experts and citizens to work collaboratively to ensure, as much as possible, that public problems were being thought about as thoroughly as could be done. Speaking to the Texas Agricultural Workers Association, he noted:

“Unquestionably, farm people, as well as State and Federal officials, must all take part in the planning or program-making process. We need, if our plans are to develop into workable programs, to base our decisions upon the combined judgments of experts, officials, and farmers. In the past there have been some differences between expert and farmer opinion on needed agricultural adjustments. These are generally due, I believe, to differences in available information upon which the opinions are based. I do not mean to imply that either the farmer or the expert has more information than the other. I mean that each has different kinds of information, and that we need both kinds to build an adequate program. The expert is often a person with a vision for only one aspect of a problem. Although the farmer may not see that

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<sup>530</sup> Ibid.

<sup>531</sup> This cultural approach included tangible and material things such as “institutions of education” and intangible and immaterial things such as the “customary habits and preferences that dictate choices and forms” and “the accumulated lore and opinions that really decide what the content, manner, and ends of education shall be.” Support for institutions of education such as discussion groups enabled citizens to talk with one another about preferences and opinions.” See *ibid.*, 219.

aspect so clearly, he is likely to see phases of his problem that the specialist overlooks.”<sup>532</sup>

No problem was as simple as it may seem or as some might claim. The knowledge and experience of both experts and ordinary men and women was crucial together, while acknowledging that this collaboration was not universal especially for tenant, migrant, and minority farmers. So, “[h]ow are we to bring the farmer and the expert together that they may exchange information and combine judgments?” The reorganization of the Department and the centralization of the BAE at planning efforts was Wilson’s response, at least partially. The other element was that Extension would collaborate with the USDA. Together, experts and farmers could address agricultural problems in a manner that respected and took seriously the various kinds of knowledge and information necessary for answering questions shaped by moral, philosophical, and spiritual values as well as scientific perspectives.<sup>533</sup>

Wilson’s contribution to *Agriculture in Modern Life* and his speech before the Texas Agricultural Workers Association touched on one of the most important themes of his thinking during this period. Scientific and research-based technical knowledge were extremely useful and necessary to making decisions, but such knowledge could not answer questions about value and meaning. Even relatively simple economic matters on the surface were interwoven with dimensions that were political, sociological, psychological, philosophical, and even religious. And, if acknowledged

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<sup>532</sup> ———, “The New Department of Agriculture,” 10-11. Related, according to McDean, Wilson felt land-grant colleges had stressed “the sciences at the expense of cultural education.” There needed to be a greater respect for the various ways to think about the challenges facing rural Americans. McDean quoted Wilson directly: “...there is a place for a combination of the vocational, the inspirational and cultural, and the citizenship type of schooling, which was pointed primarily to the farm and farm life.” See McDean, “M. L. Wilson and Agricultural Reform in Twentieth Century America”, 485.

<sup>533</sup> Wilson, “The New Department of Agriculture,” 11; ———, “Patterns of Rural Cultures,” 218.

and addressed as having these further dimensions, problems could not rely exclusively on technical knowledge because such an approach is explicitly limited. People needed to wrestle with different values system, requiring people to discuss and deliberate with one another.

In many ways, Wilson echoed a point he had made not long after arriving at the BAE in the summer of 1924. During his presidential address to the Farm Economic Association's meeting in December of 1925, he noted how the job of the economist was "by no means completed with fact collection." If the economist was to meet society's challenges, "there yet remains interpretation and synthesis.... facts must be interpreted in terms of particular situations, and the extension agencies should, as a result of these interpreted and synthesized economic facts and judgments, influence action on the part of farmers."<sup>534</sup> He emphasized the role of the expert because he was speaking to experts, yet he also stressed contextual interpretation. Extension agents were to influence action, but for what ends? As we see roughly fifteen years later, he further developed his thinking about the role and relationship between experts and ordinary men and women when addressing and dealing public problems. For Wilson there always were moral, philosophical, and spiritual questions wrapped in otherwise seemingly straightforward economic issues. It was in the 1940 USDA yearbook that Wilson authored a chapter explicitly about the need to think beyond economics. He wrote, "Whoever has studied the social and economic aspects of agriculture as they are presented in detail in the articles that make up this book must be convinced that there is a problem of adjustment in agricultural and rural life that is

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<sup>534</sup> ———, "The Source Material of Economic Research and Points of View in Its Organization," *Journal of Farm Economics* 8, no. 1 (1926): 9-10.

not simple and cannot be solved by simple means. Even the major questions were numerous.”<sup>535</sup>

The issues facing rural communities—and by extension the entire nation—needed to be addressed through the participation of citizens. For change to occur, or to bring about “reform,” efforts needed to grow from the ground up and be built on “the solid rock of democratic opinion.” But this opinion was not just something to be gathered by experts through research; efforts for reform were instead to emerge from the desires of rural people who needed to “determine its form.” The work of democracy, in Wilson’s view, was fundamentally the work of citizens, but experts had roles to play; as sources of information but also as conveners and counselors. In this approach, agricultural leaders aided ordinary men and women by creating opportunities where “the rank and file may set up their local problems into a national perspective, help to articulate the opinions that are formed on this basis, and finally assist them in turning ideas into action.”<sup>536</sup>

The cultural approach Wilson supported was, in his view, the most practical method of reform with respect to agriculture. It avoided oversimplification on one hand and harsh intolerance on the other. Employing such an approach to public problems enabled both “laymen and social scientists” to see the interrelated nature of social phenomena and also to ensure that dimensions of rural life were not “divided up and put in separate pigeonholes, as the artificial divisions of the social sciences suggest.”<sup>537</sup> For many within the federal government, higher education, and other

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<sup>535</sup> ———, “Beyond Economics,” 922-923.

<sup>536</sup> Ibid., 925.

<sup>537</sup> Ibid., 926.

professional contexts, the agricultural problem was a question about the application of technological and physical manipulations, but Wilson pushed against that view. To quote Wilson:

“We have the means already at hand for the desired technical and physical manipulation of the material elements in our altered environment. We have, that is, both machines and skills. We also have statistical inventories of physical resources and production techniques which enable us to calculate our capacity to produce goods to satisfy physical needs. On the basis of this knowledge of material things, it would therefore seem possible to direct our own destinies sufficiently well to avoid the kind of irrational adjustments in the supply and distribution of goods to which we are grievously subject.”<sup>538</sup>

Wilson acknowledged that professionals had “both machines and skills.” But the limitation of the scientific or technical approach to public problems was the “dealing largely or exclusively with the material phases of social problems as opposed to the psychological and cultural phases.” The real genius that could shape reform, in Wilson’s view, did not reside in the technical competence but rather in psychological and cultural insight. “We only admit the truth when we recognize that our economic problems are moral problems,” he stated.<sup>539</sup>

So if Wilson’s assessment was accurate, how would one proceed? He suggested education, but this was not “experts telling farmers what the truth is.” That was especially the case since many experts needed education themselves. Education appropriate for the issues facing Americans would “stimulate the critical senses...develop broader points of view, and...develop creative imagination by applying a scientific skepticism to those ideas we have that do not conform to the contemporary world of fact.” What was necessary was an increase in both the amount

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<sup>538</sup> Ibid., 927.

<sup>539</sup> Ibid., 927, 928.

and intensity of thought and discussion about agricultural problems through the use of democratic methods. This was essential because the democratic ideal “is the first assumption of all our ideals of agricultural progress.” Such discussion, Wilson warned, should push citizens beyond the frontiers of what was known and factually proved and move into the realm of philosophic ideas and moral preferences. Such thinking did not lead directly to scientific or technical responses to the agricultural problem. But, philosophical ideas could help refocus thinking in such a way as to alter how one viewed public problems and which “immediate, calculable, and practical programs [were] possible.”<sup>540</sup> Social scientists had narrowed their view of the world to such an extent to not see culture “as a living dynamic whole.”<sup>541</sup> It was essential, in Wilson’s mind, to think about issues more broadly.

Yet still, in addition to the publications of Wilson’s thinking thus far included, there are many other examples of Wilson’s thinking during this period in which he articulated his philosophy of how a federal agency such as the USDA could and should play a role in working with citizens to address the problems they faced in their communities.

Despite not being an “official” book about the work of the USDA, the preface to *Democracy Has Roots* reflected how the Department had “passed far beyond mere interest in the technics of agriculture and is deeply concerned with the relation of that branch of economy to American life in its widest ranges.”<sup>542</sup> The philosophy shaping

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<sup>540</sup> Ibid., 929-930.

<sup>541</sup> ———, “The Democratic Processes and the Formulation of Agricultural Policy,” *Social Forces* 19, no. 1 (1940): 11.

<sup>542</sup> Charles A. Beard, “Preface,” *Democracy Has Roots*, by M. L. Wilson (New York: Carrick & Evans, 1939), 11.

Wilson's thinking drew heavily from pragmatism, especially John Dewey. In the words of John S. Gilkeson, Wilson was "'a rip-snorting pragmatist' who considered Dewey's *Freedom and Culture* 'the best statement' of understanding of democracy as a 'cultural pattern.'"<sup>543</sup> In fact, Wilson claimed Dewey as his favorite philosopher.<sup>544</sup>

Wilson lamented how the scientific era pushed philosophy into the background. The result was that individuals would believe that "all of man's needs could be fulfilled by the magic of science." But a change was occurring. If the lectures taking place within the USDA that comprised *Democracy Has Roots* were indicative of anything, let alone the work of the discussion groups and Schools across the country, there was an "unmistakable reversal taking place." Social engineers would have to become of two minds and orientations: social philosophers as well as "men of action."<sup>545</sup>

Others addressed this challenge raised by Wilson. In his presidential address to the American Statistical Association in December 1936, Joseph S. Davis called for "Schools of Social Engineering." He recognized the progress of pure science and the contributions of engineering and medicine and wanted to establish alongside schools of natural sciences schools that would draw on social scientists to solve social problems. "There is room for social engineering workshops," Davis contended, "to

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<sup>543</sup> John S. Gilkeson, *Anthropologists and the Rediscovery of America, 1886-1965* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 62. Wilson referred to himself as a "rip-snorting pragmatist" who was a descendent of William James, John Dewey, and J. H. Tufts. Wilson said pragmatism was "the only kind of philosophy that I think is worth a damn." Wilson, "Reminiscences of Milburn Lincoln Wilson," 1018.

<sup>544</sup> Gilbert, "Eastern Urban Liberals and Midwestern Agrarian Intellectuals: Two Group Portraits of Progressives in the New Deal Department of Agriculture," 169.

<sup>545</sup> M. L. Wilson, "New Horizons in Agricultural Economics," *Journal of Farm Economics* 20, no. 1 (1938): 6.

parallel our engineering laboratories.”<sup>546</sup> He recognized there was a greater need for experts to broaden their thinking about public problems and their roles in addressing and responding to them.

In an article deeply influenced by Davis’ address, Wilson noted that the “bold revolutionary statement made by my relatively conservative friend Dr. Davis is that some pretty definite thinking should be done at this time regarding the functions of economics and what he calls Social Engineering.”<sup>547</sup> Davis and many other agricultural economists were acknowledging the need for professionals to receive broader training. Increasingly, social engineering was shaping agriculture and agricultural planning. To quote Davis, “In the stage that the engineering art had reached fifty years ago, it would have been disastrous to attempt to build the San Francisco Bay Bridge. It is no less disastrous today to attempt to build its social counterparts while the technique of social engineering is in its present stage.”<sup>548</sup> He closed his address by saying, “I envisage the rise of a new profession of social engineering, with a future truly great.”<sup>549</sup>

Speaking to his agricultural economist colleagues in the *Journal of Farm Economics*, Wilson expressed his belief—and a response to Davis—that, “by and large...we are the product of a very highly specialized system of graduate university training. We are not ‘generalists.’”<sup>550</sup> What was necessary was a new philosophy that grounded experts in their respective areas of concentration while also looking at public

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<sup>546</sup> Joseph S. Davis, "Statistics and Social Engineering," *Journal of the American Statistical Association* 32, no. 197 (1937): 3.

<sup>547</sup> Wilson, "New Horizons in Agricultural Economics," 1.

<sup>548</sup> Davis, "Statistics and Social Engineering," 4.

<sup>549</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

<sup>550</sup> Wilson, "New Horizons in Agricultural Economics," 4.



problems as complex and wicked problems, not as tame or technical problems for which they had been trained and knew how to address.<sup>551</sup> Davis suggested social scientists would need 50 years to transform such academic and institutional thinking. But, as Wilson said, “We need this thing so badly, let us see if it cannot be achieved in much less than fifty years.” The world as it was known then was not the only one possible. Envisioning a different world would require citizens to engage others in a learning environment and explore philosophical questions.<sup>552</sup> Fortunately, this was not simply a utopian dream of Wilson’s.

Farmers and other rural leaders had been participating in discussions about values through the educational initiatives of the PSD’s discussion groups and Schools. They were “not only broadening their own outlook, [but] they’re also doing a real service for America. They’re strengthening democracy by keeping its roots alive.”<sup>553</sup> In what might be called a summation of Wilson’s thought from this period, *Extension Service Circular 355* stands as a testament to his commitment to coherently articulate a theory of agricultural democracy through a cultural lens.<sup>554</sup>

A cultural approach to rural problems took into consideration the role of values in addition to any other forms of knowledge, technical or otherwise. In “A Theory of Agricultural Democracy,” Wilson pulled together the tensions that shaped his philosophy but also his practice: democratic ideals and practical problem solving. Speaking to these ideals, he wrote, “[d]emocracy can be thought of as a form of

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<sup>551</sup> On the concept of wicked problems, see Rittel and Webber, “Dilemmas in a General Theory of Planning.” Note the term “wicked problems” emerged and gained prominence decades later. At this point in time, such issues were spoke about as being multi-dimensional.

<sup>552</sup> Wilson, “New Horizons in Agricultural Economics,” 7.

<sup>553</sup> ———, “Farmers Talk About National Issues,” *The Indiana Farmer's Guide* 93, no. 7 (1937): 3.

<sup>554</sup> ———, “A Theory of Agricultural Democracy.”

government or as a cultural pattern of which the form of government and political processes are but one aspect. I choose the latter concept rather than the former.” But this was balanced with an eye towards problem solving: “Democracy needs the most capable, the most efficient, and the most smooth-running administration that present society is capable of giving.”<sup>555</sup> Wilson’s theory of agricultural democracy was rooted in a cultural pattern rather than a narrowly defined conception of government. For him, participation in democracy was essential. As Wilson put it, “Maximum, intelligent participation on the part of the individual farmer and his family is the very keystone of this democratic pattern,” which was only possible with complete freedom to engage ideas and fellow citizens in discussion.<sup>556</sup>

Farmers, experts, and the government officials ideally engaged in the process of policy formation rooted in the deliberative and educative act of listening to and learning from and with others. Through his writings as well as through his administrative support of discussion groups and Schools, Wilson sought to encourage the creation of space for discussion with others in a way that many modern governments would shun as antiquated, impractical or inefficient.<sup>557</sup> And while Wilson was a dominant voice, he was not the only individual shaping this work. He had chosen wisely when he reached out to his old professor from Chicago.

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<sup>555</sup> Ibid., 11, 17.

<sup>556</sup> Ibid., 20.

<sup>557</sup> In his study of the Tennessee Valley Authority, Philip Selznick noted how the USDA made tremendous efforts to engage citizens and how there could be “little doubt that the United States Department of Agriculture [had] gone much farther in developing both a theory and the practice of citizen participation” than the TVA had. Selznick made explicit reference to M. L. Wilson’s theory of agricultural democracy and stated the theory’s general principles. Selznick went on to acknowledge the extent to which citizens were part of volunteer associations and planning committees. See Philip Selznick, *Tva and the Grass Roots: A Study in the Sociology of Formal Organization* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1949), 221ff.

***Carl F. Taeusch***

Complementing Wilson's views on the USDA's democratic purpose was Carl F. Taeusch. Now firmly established as the head of the PSD, Taeusch expressed succinctly and clearly a vision for what discussion groups and Schools meant for American democracy. Involved with the discussion work since its early days, Taeusch's articulation of his philosophy about this civic work matured during the late 1930s and early 1940s. If we look closely at his contribution to the 1940 USDA yearbook, "Schools of Philosophy for Farmers," we see his philosophy about the work of the PSD.

Taeusch began the chapter by acknowledging that a "major characteristic" of American life at the time was a search for what he called truly democratic methods in "running our affairs." The USDA, along with many other government and social organizations, sought to articulate and practice democratic habits. In one sense this was because they truly believed in democratic practices. But, in another and maybe more prevalent sense, the desire for democracy came from a fear that other nations were falling to anti-democratic ideologies and dictatorship.

The work he and the small band of social scientists in the PSD were doing with Extension agents and others across the country was, in his view, a significant development in rural life. They were helping create opportunities for citizens to learn about and discuss the fundamental problems facing society. Within this deliberative setting that was "wide and free", "both sides of controversial questions [were] attacked and defended vigorously." Participants not only learned something, but they were also taking part in a democratic safety valve against anti-democratic ideologies. Discussion

groups were a “training ground” for democratic habits and methods, Taeusch argued.<sup>558</sup>

For him, it was only natural to have such work taking place in rural communities since farmers were “natural-born” philosophers who had the ability to “see life whole.” Taeusch was quick to note that farmers were not necessarily concerned with determining if they were doing philosophy or not, but instead wanted “questions answered, or at least...would like to talk them over and find out what others think about them.” This is what inspired administrators to develop discussion groups initially in 1935. They wanted to help stimulate “even more thinking” about the broader implications of the national agricultural program and raise questions about what should be done to improve the lives of rural citizens. For example, what implications did these programs have on their lives and the lives of their children? What could farmers proactively do about the economic forces impacting them? How did all the problems come about? These were the types of “profound” questions Taeusch felt discussion could help answer, or at least help farmers understand them better.<sup>559</sup>

Discussion was central to Taeusch’s conception of democracy. For him, democracy was more than periodic elections and the citizen was more than a voter; instead democracy was a “continuous...process.” Anticipating critiques of the educational endeavor launched by the PSD, Taeusch offered this warning: “...if this form of education is regarded as costly, let us remember that it is not so costly as would be the loss of our democratic processes themselves.” For too long, education

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<sup>558</sup> Taeusch, “Schools of Philosophy for Farmers,” 1111.

<sup>559</sup> Ibid., 1111-1112.

had not been seen as an “adult problem.” Outside of those in Extension and other adult education contexts, “education” ended with high school commencement or even sometime before. For those who critiqued the PSD as a program that “never [got] beyond the talking stage” and one that lacked an explicit connection to action, Tausch warned it was better to be condemned for helping to foster “profound thinking” among farm people, regardless of what they might decide, rather than be viewed as simply being a vehicle for government propaganda.<sup>560</sup>

Committed to engaging controversial and divisive topics, Schools brought together well-known critics of and opponents to the USDA’s efforts and encouraged them to be “perfectly candid” in their critique of the national agricultural programs.<sup>561</sup> Additionally, Tausch connected both the discussion groups and Schools to ancient democratic practices rooted in discussion. He wrote: “To maintain the spirit of this

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<sup>560</sup> Ibid., 1113, 1121, 1120. Tausch expounded on this point: “More profound thinking among farm people is being encouraged, regardless of what they may finally decide; greater confidence in their own judgments, so that they will express themselves fearlessly; and a feeling that they are a part of a government and society and should take a hand in controlling them.”

<sup>561</sup> Ibid., 1115, 1119. In the published materials from a School for Washington employees of the Forest Service, Tausch spoke about the importance of “the minority hav[ing] its say” and the how it was essential for Schools to include critics of the USDA on the programs. He also noted how it was essential that both those in the majority and minority recognize their responsibilities to one another to ensure that democracy is practiced. ———, “How Can Philosophy Help the Employee in This Understanding,” *Lectures and Discussions from School of Philosophy for Washington Employees*, ed. Forest Service Clerical Training Committee and Bureau of Agricultural Economics Program Study and Discussion Division (Washington, DC: Forest Service; U.S. Department of Agriculture, 1941), 6.

The role of well-known academics is detailed in Jewett, “The Social Sciences, Philosophy, and the Cultural Turn in the 1930s USDA.” Jewett offers lists of notable participants in Schools of Philosophy as well as the USDA’s lecture series on democracy in 1938 and the various disciplinary conferences held at the Department during the late 1930s. Regarding the inclusion of USDA critics, one notable example comes from a School at the University of Minnesota during which Harvey Walker, from The Ohio State University, spoke about the changes in government from a degree of “individualism and *laissez faire* as our basic economic and political philosophy to democratic collectivism.” Harvey Walker, “Changes in State and National Government and Their Significance for Civil Service, Presented at the Minneapolis-St. Paul USDA Club School of Philosophy, Held at the University Farm, University of Minnesota, St. Paul, November 26-29, 1940,” Harvey Walker Papers, Record Group 40/5/27, Talks: Miscellaneous: 1931, 1934-1940, Folder 3, The Ohio State University Archives, The Ohio State University, 3.

great democratic institution, not only in the Halls of Congress and our State legislatures but in local community meetings as well, increasingly devolves on us in the United States of America—especially now that elsewhere the enemies of democracy are in the saddle and riding fast and furiously.” Situating the PSD’s discussion engagement in the tradition of democratic practice is something that had both supporters and detractors.<sup>562</sup>

The connection between adult education and democracy was squarely on the mind of Taeusch. He lamented how education efforts had, in many cases, been “almost exclusively” about the dissemination of information, which often times were “inferential and opinionated as well as factual.” He noted two unfortunate features:

“One has been that it has been limited and biased, even when parading as scientific knowledge or unprejudiced advice.... The second characteristic of the dissemination of information is one of educational method, and this is more clearly subject to criticism. It consists in the very fact that information is disseminated—given out without any chance for the listener to respond in a give-and-take fashion.... But education is more than this. It requires a response from the pupil that will register itself on the ‘educator’ and perhaps modify the latter’s thoughts and behavior, thereby resulting in a new reaction, which will still further stimulate pupil reactions, and so on, indefinitely.”<sup>563</sup>

Without an opportunity to create a space for learning through give-and-take, education was limiting for all involved. In many ways, Taeusch echoed Mary Parker Follett’s

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<sup>562</sup> Taeusch, “Schools of Philosophy for Farmers,” 1121. William Keith has cautioned against a “straight-line history of evolution from the town meeting to the forum” and explicitly named David Mathews as someone who has, misguidedly, suggested such an evolution. See Keith, *Democracy as Discussion*, 219; Mathews, *Politics for People*, 51-64. While one can easily argue deliberative manifestations of democracy took many forms, there was and is a certain philosophy underlying them, regardless of whether they are the sometimes-mythic New England town hall meeting or discussion groups during the New Deal. In Mathews words: “The point that is important here—that leads us to see a connection between these early town meetings and the new sort of town meetings...—is that the meetings did not begin as formal institutions of the colonial government; they were *public* institutions.” ———, *The Promise of Democracy: A Source Book for Use with National Issues Forums* (Dayton, OH: Kettering Foundation, 1988), 2.

<sup>563</sup> Taeusch, “Schools of Philosophy for Farmers,” 1121-1122.

concept of “power-with” and her belief that an individual is never reacting only to what someone has said, but instead to “you-plus-me, or be more accurate, it is I-plus-you reacting to you-plus-me.”<sup>564</sup> Follett’s notion of “power-with” stood in stark contrast to “power-over,” a more prevalent notion of how those in leadership roles interacted with others.<sup>565</sup> Rather than relying on certain individual leaders or experts, “power-with” took time and requires the “slower process of education” with diverse individuals each contributing their knowledge to the question or task at hand.<sup>566</sup> While Follett died in 1933, many of her views helped inform administrators such as Taesch who were looking for alternatives to the increasingly centralized and bureaucratized form of liberalism taking hold through the 1930s and 1940s.<sup>567</sup> Follett’s emphasis on

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<sup>564</sup> Mary Parker Follett, *Creative Experience* (New York: Longmans, Green and Company, 1924), 62. Follett’s contribution to early twentieth century thought, especially in regards to the relationship between individuals and others in group settings. In the introduction to her 1918 book *The New State*, Follett stated, “Representative democracy has failed” and the individual citizen was not valued enough in this model of democracy. “We sought to find him through the method of representation and failed to find him.” But calls for direct democracy were inadequate and were a “mere phantom of democracy.” This was because democracy was not a “sum in addition. Democracy is not brute numbers; it is a genuine union of true individuals.” Later in *The New State*, Follett wrote: “Democracy is an infinitely including spirit. We have an instinct for democracy because we have an instinct for wholeness; we get wholeness only through reciprocal relations, through infinitely expanding reciprocal relations. Democracy is really neither extending nor including merely, but creating wholes.”———, *The New State: Group Organization the Solution of Popular Government* (New York: Longmans, Green and Company, [1918] 1926), 5, 157. This desire for relationships and wholeness would continue to animate her thinking about what Andrew Jewett would call Follett’s proposed system of “face-to-face discussion groups,” what we would now call “deliberative democracy.” Jewett, *Science, Democracy, and the American University*, 174. See also Joan C. Tonn’s study on Follett that offers an extended treatment of *The New State* and explores, in greater depth, the nuanced position Follett outlines in this work. See Joan C. Tonn, *Mary P. Follett: Creating Democracy, Transforming Management* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 203), 265-328.

<sup>565</sup> Follett, *Creative Experience*, 189. Follett’s leadership model of “power-with” is briefly described in Stephen Preskill and Stephen D. Brookfield, *Learning as a Way of Leading: Lessons from the Struggle for Social Justice* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2009), 149-169; Tonn, *Mary P. Follett*, 382-383.

<sup>566</sup> Follett, *Creative Experience*, 190.

<sup>567</sup> Sidney M. Milkis and Jerome M. Mileur, “Introduction: The New Deal, Then and Now,” in *The New Deal and the Triumph of Liberalism*, ed. Sidney M. Milkis and Jerome M. Mileur (Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 2002), 10-14. In his introduction to a collection of Follett’s writings, Peter F. Drucker noted Follett’s “primary and constant endeavor” to encourage active and engaged citizens as a counterbalance to the dominance of questions about how to make “government more controlling, bigger, and more powerful” in the 1930s. See Peter F. Drucker, “Introduction,” in *Mary Parker*

democratic deliberation and her belief that the neighborhood was the preferred place for this intimate and collaborative work found new life through the efforts of agencies and organizations such as the PSD. Such democratic approaches became “attenuated as policy debate shrank to a set of choices between alternative means to predetermined ends.”<sup>568</sup> Reclaiming more robust forms of democracy was challenging, especially as policy was increasingly about fewer options and streamlined approaches.

Returning to Taeusch, we see how the PSD’s work embodied his commitment to providing information to citizens while simultaneously championing their role as political actors with agency. To him, the national agricultural program was becoming increasingly decentralized and more and more dependent on rural citizens “who, in a pragmatic sense, [were] the Department of Agriculture,” Taeusch provocatively suggested.<sup>569</sup> He offered four principles to be observed by federal agencies sponsoring education programs similar to what the PSD was doing.

1. There should be a wide and increasing dissemination of factual information.
2. Factual information is necessary to, but an inadequate substitute for, education—especially such educational activities as are concerned with the development of discrimination and judgment concerning public policies or social values or the facts themselves.
3. Any program of education that aims to implement these objectives must include the opportunity for all sides to be heard and discussed.
4. Finally, any program of adult education aimed at the study and discussion of public policies must provide means of implementing the judgments formulated, not only sporadically, at the ballot box, but continuously, by channeling these judgments to the central authorities and thereby improving the administrative activities at Washington and in the field—a day-by-day task.<sup>570</sup>

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*Follett—Prophet of Management: A Celebration of Writings from the 1920s*, ed. Pauline Graham (Boston, MA: Harvard Business School Press, 1995), 7.

<sup>568</sup> Albert Z. Guttenberg, *The Language of Planning: Essays on the Origins and Ends of American Planning Thought* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1993), 95; Jewett, *Science, Democracy, and the American University*, 225.

<sup>569</sup> Taeusch, “Schools of Philosophy for Farmers,” 1123.

<sup>570</sup> *Ibid.*



He concluded the chapter by noting education was not only for children, but for adults—something more than “book l’arnin” of academic subjects but something “of the very life activities of the people.” Education was not something confined to content or subject matter, memory and rote, but instead became instrumental in daily life and “to the solving of community as well as national problems, and to the formulation of sound judgments on matters of public policy.” He ended the essay with this encompassing statement: “Any educational objective short of this would develop an inadequate conception of democracy.”<sup>571</sup>

The next year, in early October 1941, Taeusch offered an explanation to an audience of Forest Service staff members as to why he valued philosophical approaches to agricultural problems. For him, the ability to form sound judgments about issues rested on the opportunity for individuals to act like philosophers who, in Taeusch’s words, “dive deeper, stay under longer and come up muddier than anybody else on the face of the globe.” Importantly for Taeusch, “philosophy” did not need to be something abstract or disconnected from one’s life. Speaking during the first session of the Forest Service’s School, Taeusch referred to philosophical questioning as something already shaping and guiding their work as professionals. As he noted, “my guess is that anyone who works in the Department of Agriculture or in the Forest Service has to have a philosophy; that you must have some kind of a philosophical attitude or you couldn’t live it.”<sup>572</sup> The role of Schools and their discussion-based model was to help each participant probe his or her own thinking and consider what

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<sup>571</sup> Ibid., 1124.

<sup>572</sup> Forest Service Clerical Training Committee and Program Study and Discussion Division, “Lectures and Discussions from School of Philosophy for Washington Employees,” 2.

knowledge and insights others might have on a particular subject that could help to think more critically and deeply about their work. In Taeusch's own words:

“And so we approach this School and the reason this name Philosophy, I think, has stuck to the Schools. For years we didn't even use the term in connection with them. But as these meetings progressed, as we got together in the afternoons in small groups to talk over what had been presented in the morning, what happened was that everybody began to break through certain obsessions that they had, they began to throw their own prejudices into a common cauldron, perfectly willing to examine them objectively and let other people look at them, gave up some prejudices that been pretty well nourished up to that time, and in the give and take began to have a broader perspective even of the humble jobs that you and I have in the Department. And that's probably why the 'nickname', if you please (for that's what it is), 'the Schools of Philosophy' happened to be applied to this thing that has been happening for the last half dozen years.”<sup>573</sup>

In Taeusch's view, everyone was guided by his or her own public philosophy, often times without acknowledging or thinking about the theory animated his or her work and views. Schools, in Taeusch's mind, were similar to the construction of new buildings on academic campuses: “...the construction of a new building, quite often mistakenly to my notion, is accompanied by the early construction of sidewalks. To my notion, the building should be constructed and then the paths should be allowed to be made by the students, and then the sidewalks should be put where the paths are formed.”<sup>574</sup> Schools offered opportunities for individuals to acknowledge, think about, and consider what their views were on a number of issues and how, in light of new knowledge and information, they might rethink their previously firmly held positions or come to new conclusions.

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<sup>573</sup> Ibid., 3.

<sup>574</sup> Ibid.

## *Conclusion*

Both Taeusch and Wilson saw education as the archstone for a conception of democracy that took seriously the knowledge and capabilities of citizens. If anything was going to preserve democracy in a time of societal transformation around the world, discussion-based education was it. They sought to complement the dissemination of factual information with opportunities for people to engage one another about issues of local, national, and international importance. The PSD's work, led and organized by civic professionals, indirectly supported action programs, offering space and opportunities for discussion about the public problems facing communities and the country.

But there was a tremendous amount of transformation occurring, especially for rural citizens. Efforts such as discussion groups and Schools were based of a philosophy that if "democracy" meant something, citizens had a vital role to play. Men and women could not passively watch everything changing around them through the actions of politicians, experts, or others in leadership positions. Yet, the numerous educational and action efforts on the part of the USDA were not always viewed optimistically.

Many questioned the role of the federal government through all of the committees present in their communities, unsure of what it was they were experiencing when it came to federal agencies implementing policies. We hear this uncertainty in a conversation Wilson had with an older farmer from Montana who said to Wilson: "...we have a lot of committees, we have more meetings than we used to have, and we belong to a lot more things. I don't understand it. A lot of things about it

confuse me, but much of the old stuff is as truly gone as the buffalo, and I think that something new is going to come out of all these committees, all this talk, and all these things that the farmers and Government are doing together.”<sup>575</sup> And while this farmer was not completely sure about everything taking place, he did support efforts for citizens to talk and work together with the guidance of Extension agents and USDA staff.

Similarly, Taeusch found himself defending the PSD’s work with a less supportive ending. In one instance, his defense was to be expressed in a very public way on the pages of *America*, a Roman Catholic magazine published by the Society of Jesus.<sup>576</sup> In April of 1940, John LaFarge, S.J., an associate editor of the publication and a Jesuit, wrote a damning piece about the PSD and its role in teaching farmers to become “cultured pagans.” He expressed concern that the BAE’s scope went “far beyond that of mere economics, agricultural or otherwise.” To him, at least theoretically, the BAE’s job was to show farmers how they should produce and market their crops. But practically, the BAE was “a powerful national agency for educating millions of people in social philosophy. It is undertaking to mold the social philosophy of the rural people of the United States.”<sup>577</sup>

LaFarge’s concern was the Schools went beyond the “purlieus of agricultural science and [taught] an elaborate philosophy of man and society” without the explicit invocation of God when dealing with “the deepest problems of society, on ultimate values and final goals.” He did agree that Taeusch and others within the BAE and

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<sup>575</sup> Wilson, "A Theory of Agricultural Democracy," 20.

<sup>576</sup> Commonly referred to as Jesuits.

<sup>577</sup> John LaFarge, "The Farmers Are Taught How to Be Cultured Pagans," *America*, April 6, 1940, 706.

USDA saw something many others failed to acknowledge: that you cannot teach even economics correctly without some principles for understanding society and social forces. But this did not excuse the federal government for engaging questions appropriate for the likes of the Roman Catholic Church. LaFarge closed with this warning: “If our rural millions are not to develop into militant pagans, we shall do well to mind the teachings of Federal agencies and counteract them with our own agrarian philosophy.” Catholics had been apprehensive of the federal government’s role through the New Deal agricultural programs, and it seemed these fears had been realized through these Schools.<sup>578</sup>

A few weeks later, Taeusch responded to LaFarge on the pages of *America*. He shared LaFarge’s concern for the need to promote a better life for “our rural people.” But he quickly pointed out that the work of the PSD was not to “‘mold the social philosophy of the rural people of the United States’ or of the ‘rural adult and youth’ or to ‘explain to farmers the benefits of various agricultural agencies of the United States Government’ or that ‘the materialistic philosophy of life and of society hold the floor.’” Those who lectured or participated in Schools were not hindered by restraints because, as Taeusch wrote, “we want them to state freely and frankly what they think about farm problems and farm programs.” In his view, LaFarge’s concerns showed his own “weakness of faith which is the greatest enemy of our cultural and spiritual

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<sup>578</sup> Ibid., 707; David S. Bovée, *The Church & the Land: The National Catholic Rural Life Conference and American Society, 1923-2007* (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2010), 95-96.

heritage.” Taeusch did not fear criticism; in fact, he expressed confidence in the “soundness and value” of providing forums for the “severest critics” of the USDA.<sup>579</sup>

In a response published alongside Taeusch’s, LaFarge shot back. Schools presented an “invitation to philosophy” and to probe personal thinking by engaging the “root problems we face as individuals and as a nation: Where are we? How did we get here? Where do we want to go?” For LaFarge, he wondered about the lack of restraint on what was said. For example, what would occur if a staff lecturer advocated for the overthrow of the democratic government? What, truly, was allowed or not?<sup>580</sup>

LaFarge concluded his comments with a direct challenge to the underlying philosophy of both discussion groups and Schools. “The B.A.E., not Catholics, have raised these issues; and Catholics share a belief with many non-Catholics that to talk of *religious* matters without speaking of God is as reasonable as to talk of farming without mentioning the soil.” How could rural men and women talk about issues of deep meaning through educational programs from something like the BAE rather than in their churches? What did this mean for the questions about intangible issues related to value and meaning?<sup>581</sup>

Much was changing for rural America. Wilson, Taeusch, and others saw the importance of having citizens understand the policies shaping agricultural policy and, through land-use planning, be intimately involved in shaping those policies rather than standing on the sidelines watching government or university experts do the work of shaping the world of which they were a part. They also fearlessly tackled issues, as

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<sup>579</sup> Carl F. Taeusch, “Correspondence: Pagan Farmers,” *America*, April 27, 1940, 73.

<sup>580</sup> John LaFarge, “Correspondence: Pagan Farmers,” *America*, April 27, 1940, 73.

<sup>581</sup> Ibid.

demonstrated by this exchange between LaFarge and Taeusch, that touched on deeply personal questions about how one should live and what relationship he or she should have with neighbors, their country, world, and in this case, their god.

This energetic exchange exposes arguably one of the most fundamental elements of the PSD and the philosophy shaping this work: that citizens would wrestle with questions about the meaning of political, cultural, and social changes taking place with the aid of Extension agents and other professionals providing structure and leadership to do so. Yet, energies within the Department were shifting to the county land-use planning efforts that emerged after the Mt. Weather Agreement had reshaped the USDA and put the BAE at the center of the Department's democratic planning efforts.

## CHAPTER 6

### THE RISE AND FALL OF THE BUREAU OF AGRICULTURAL ECONOMICS

“A tired man leaves his labor, felt  
In every ligament, to walk  
Alone across the new-mowed field,  
And at its bound, the last cut stalk,”  
– Wendell Berry<sup>582</sup>

#### *County Land-Use Takes Center Stage*

Time and resources were being focused on the new county land-use planning project, an effort that was quickly becoming a serious element of the USDA during the final years of the 1930s and early 1940s.<sup>583</sup> The restructured Department, with the BAE functioning as its planning hub, made this possible. With support from within the Department and an agreement with Extension stemming from Mt. Weather about their respective roles, county land-use planning spread rapidly. The effort became “quite expansive by 1942” with nearly 2,200 counties (two thirds of all in the United States) having planning committees.<sup>584</sup> County committees grew from 25,000 in 1939 to almost 60,000 two years later. These committees offered “farmers...an opportunity to strengthen the democratic process while working out national policy at the point where national policy most closely touches their daily lives.”<sup>585</sup>

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<sup>582</sup> Wendell Berry, *Sabbaths* (New York: North Point Press, 1987), 72.

<sup>583</sup> Neil C. Gross emphasizes that while the Mt. Weather Agreement raised the role of county land-use planning, county planning was not a new phenomenon. Gross, "A Post Mortem on County Planning," 646. Others also noted earlier roots of farmer participation and consent in planning with USDA programs. Lewis, "Democratic Planning in Agriculture, I," 234.

<sup>584</sup> Gilbert, "Democratic Planning in Agricultural Policy," 240.

<sup>585</sup> F. F. Elliott, "We, the People..." *Land Policy Review* 2, no. 3 (1939): 1.



Such opportunities were seen as being critically important since the depleted agricultural land of the country was not the only type of erosion taking place. As one author asserted, the “[e]rosion of the soil in which democracy can grow has also taken place at an accelerating rate.” For too long, the author continued, men and women had focused primarily on their own private affairs, leaving little or no time for participation in public life.<sup>586</sup> Committees were an opportunity to build on the USDA’s educational program most fully articulated and expressed through the work of the PSD.<sup>587</sup> In both theory and practice, this new kind of “state/society relationship” transcended earlier efforts.<sup>588</sup>

This new effort to establish county land-use planning committees looked at rural communities holistically. Land-use inventories of counties included aspects of the communities beyond strictly agricultural concerns: roadside beautification, recreation, farm-home grounds, etc. “In other words,” Wilson said, “this was something that was to include practically all aspects of the land resources of the county, the agricultural organization of the county, and the social and economic conditions of the rural people of the county.”<sup>589</sup> The expansiveness of the county land-use planning project emerged as a formidable approach to democratizing agricultural policy, especially as an attempt to bring about progressive reform and participatory modernization as an alternative to a powerful conservative approach to agriculture stemming from an alliance between the Farm Bureau and supportive politicians. It

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<sup>586</sup> Ibid., 2.

<sup>587</sup> Gilbert, “Low Modernism and the Agrarian New Deal,” 138-139; Jewett, “The Social Sciences, Philosophy, and the Cultural Turn in the 1930s USDA,” 405.

<sup>588</sup> Gilbert, “Democratic Planning in Agricultural Policy,” 234.

<sup>589</sup> Wilson, “Reminiscences of Milburn Lincoln Wilson,” 2026.

was, as Jess Gilbert has written, “the last, best chance to narrow the gap between scientists/administrators and farmers.”<sup>590</sup>

Part of the work of committees was to have local farmers and experts work together collaboratively to create plans for their communities, utilizing both the experience and knowledge of local residents as well as that of the government experts in determining what lands were appropriate for crops and what needed to lay fallow or simply be reclaimed as untamed lands. Together, they would produce land-use maps based on technical knowledge on soils and erosion as well as information based on the experience of farmers working the land who know what worked and what did not. An example comes from Tolley’s *The Farmer Citizen at War*:

“The state and Federal scientists who knew the techniques of drawing land-use maps were sent into the field to sit down with local people and show them how these maps were drawn. These people in turn passed on the information to their neighbors. The result was that within a few months very excellent land-use maps of the counties where the farmers had wrestled with their problems began to be available for both the lay and official people interested in improving agricultural programs and agriculture itself. A vast reservoir of knowledge about the use of land and methods of improving its use began to build up, a reservoir that could not otherwise have been accumulated over many times the period it took to get it together.”<sup>591</sup>

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<sup>590</sup> Gilbert, "Low Modernism and the Agrarian New Deal," 133. Because the county land-use planning efforts and the PSD were part of the BAE, it is essential to understand the broader dynamics of the BAE with Congress, Extension, and the Farm Bureau, among other entities. For more details about the county land-use planning project, see Parks, "Experiment in the Democratic Planning of Public Agricultural Activity"; Gilbert, "Democratic Planning in Agricultural Policy."; ———, "Low Modernism and the Agrarian New Deal."; ———, "Rural Sociology and Democratic Planning in the Third New Deal," *Agricultural History* 82, no. 4 (2008).

<sup>591</sup> H. R. Tolley, *The Farmer Citizen at War* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1943), 259-260. Tolley reveals an interesting note about this book: while his name appeared on the book, others in the BAE did most of the first draft of the book. "It was an attempt to set down for ourselves and the general public our philosophy, our feeling about agriculture and farm people and how they might fare better in the future than they had in the past." ———, "Reminiscences of Howard R. Tolley," 604.

New, collective knowledge was the result of committee work and something that farmers or experts would not have been able to create alone. In the 1940 BAE annual report, Tolley stressed the collaborative nature of the Bureau's work: "Thus farmers, agency representatives, research technicians, and extension workers function as a team on community, county, and State land use planning committees."<sup>592</sup> The "pooling of knowledge" was working as planned.<sup>593</sup>

Aptly using the title, "A Democracy Uses its Experts in a Time of Crisis" for his 1941 report, Tolley expressed the continued practice of the BAE to "fuse the data of its experts with the practical experience of the Nation's farmers, and to put this fused knowledge to work for the Nation. This merging of the experience of layman and expert—in recent years a problem of increasing importance to the success of democracy—has seemed crucial in the current emergency."<sup>594</sup> Such a view had long been building within in the USDA, notably with the wide circulation of a short article on the limitations of the "expert" by Harold Laski. Laski, a British political theorist and economist, wrote:

"No one, I think could seriously deny to-day that in fact none of our social problems are capable of wise resolution without formulation of its content by an expert mind.... But it is one thing to urge the need for expert consultation at every stage in making policy; it is another thing, and a very different thing, to insist that the expert's judgment must be final. For special knowledge and the highly trained mind produce their own limitations which, in the realm of statesmanship, are of decisive importance.... Above all, perhaps, and this most urgently where human problems are concerned, the expert fails to see that every judgment he

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<sup>592</sup> ———, *Report of the Chief of the Bureau of Agricultural Economics, 1940*, 9.

<sup>593</sup> Gilbert, "Low Modernism and the Agrarian New Deal," 144.

<sup>594</sup> H. R. Tolley, *Report of the Chief of the Bureau of Agricultural Economics, 1941* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1942), 1. Tolley would later further emphasize this point: "It would be a great mistake to undervalue the specialist. Without him, society could not function. In order to explore the ways in which society can make full use of his capacity, however, it is necessary to appraise with some exactness just what his place in society is." ———, *The Farmer Citizen at War*, 234.

makes not purely factual in nature brings with it a scheme of values which has no special validity about it. He tends to confuse the importance of his facts with the importance of what he proposes to do about them.... We must ceaselessly remember that no body of experts is wise enough, or good enough, to be charged with the destiny of mankind. Just because they are experts, the whole of life is, for them, in constant danger of being sacrificed to a part; and they are saved from disaster only by the need of deference to the plain man's common sense. It is, I believe, upon the perpetuation of this deference that our safety very largely depends.”<sup>595</sup>

Laski's emphasis on the importance—but inherent limitation—of expert knowledge reflected a popular view within the USDA that was highlighted in the writings and statements made by both Wilson and Taeusch. In a letter to Bushrod Allin, a state representative for the BAE noted how, “the principles set forth in [Laski's] article are fundamentally part of the basis for the Land-Use Planning process.”<sup>596</sup> Allin would also express this point:

“The task of synthesis or of determining the relationships of the part to the whole cannot be done adequately without the assistance of the layman who is confronted with the whole problem and nor merely with part-problems. Both philosophy and science are involved in his decisions, and democracy itself is a philosophy as well as a form of government.... The farmer has a contribution to make to planning that lies within the fields of the various specialists, but which is the outgrowth of an experience he has had in operating farms and farm land, an experience which is both complementary and supplementary to that of the specialist. On the other hand, to recognize both the desirability and the necessity for farmer participation is not to conclude that the administrator and technician are useless.”<sup>597</sup>

Similarly, there was great interest in the BAE regarding another influential publication, *Knowledge for What?*<sup>598</sup> Both publications reinforced the views held by USDA administrators. It “puts on the printed page a great many of the intangible ideas

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<sup>595</sup> Harold J. Laski, *The Limitations of the Expert* (London: The Fabian Society, 1931), 3, 4, 14.

<sup>596</sup> Kirkendall, *Social Scientists and Farm Politics in the Age of Roosevelt*, 184.

<sup>597</sup> Allin, “County Planning Project—a Cooperative Approach to Agricultural Planning,” 298-299.

<sup>598</sup> Robert S. Lynd, *Knowledge for What? The Place of Social Science in American Culture* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1939).

that are floating around the Department,” Wilson wrote to Robert S. Lynd, the author of *Knowledge for What?*<sup>599</sup>

It was easy to see why Wilson would write such a statement, given Lynd’s view of social science’s role in society: “Modern science tends to be atomistic. Its drive is to isolate smaller and smaller variables and to study these in the greatest possible details with the aid of minute controls.... Countering this drive toward atomism has been another toward organization, which insists that the refined unit must be studied also as part of the functioning whole.”<sup>600</sup> Publications such as *Knowledge for What?* and *The Limitations of Experts* were required reading in the BAE. Wilson expressed similar views when he wrote, “Every effort is being made, particularly on the State level and on the local level, to integrate and bring into democratic relationships the ideas and aspirations of the people of the land, and the technicians and research workers.”<sup>601</sup>

Simultaneous to increased land-use planning efforts, the BAE continued to organize Schools. These included Extension agents, farmers, teachers, pastors, and USDA field staff—comprised of staff from numerous agencies such as the AAA, BAE, Soil Conservation Service, Farm Security Administration, Farm Credit Administration, Weather Bureau, and the Bureaus of Animal, Plant, and Dairy Industries.<sup>602</sup> But by this point in time, the PSD had lost the support of two key administrators: Henry A. Wallace and M. L. Wilson.

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<sup>599</sup> Kirkendall, *Social Scientists and Farm Politics in the Age of Roosevelt*, 185.

<sup>600</sup> Lynd, *Knowledge for What? The Place of Social Science in American Culture*, 12.

<sup>601</sup> Wilson, “The Democratic Processes and the Formulation of Agricultural Policy,” 3.

<sup>602</sup> Tolley, *Report of the Chief of the Bureau of Agricultural Economics, 1940*, 63.

While still within the federal government, Wallace had been elected Vice President alongside Roosevelt on the Democratic Party's winning ticket in November 1940. Additionally, Wilson transitioned from the Under Secretary position to become the director of Extension Work. Wilson would maintain his support for the work of the PSD, albeit it was now in a different capacity and removed from his previously central role.<sup>603</sup>

### *New Secretary, Similar Visions*

Claude Wickard became the 12<sup>th</sup> Secretary of Agriculture on September 5, 1940. He was, in the words of one historian, “a Hoosier dirt farmer.” Attending Purdue University and graduating with a major in animal husbandry, Wickard put his education to work on his family's farm. Elected to the Indiana State Legislature in 1932, Wickard was respected by the agricultural community because of his background. Soon after joining the legislature, he was selected to be the representative from Indiana to the National Corn-Hog Committee that helped to establish the AAA corn-hog program. Later, Wickard was invited to become Chief of the Corn-Hog Section of the AAA and he continued in that capacity until the impending entry into World War II, when, as some scholars put it, having Wickard as secretary offered

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<sup>603</sup> Lachman, "Democratic Ideology and Agricultural Policy "Program Study and Discussion" in the U.S. Department of Agriculture, 1934-1946", 42. Tolley would later speak of this transition for Wilson as “quite a step down.... Maybe I should put it this way: M. L. liked being Henry Wallace's Under Secretary. He had an influence on a great many things, and enjoyed life most of the time he was in that position.... I don't know, but I've always assumed that the change was worked out between M. L. and Henry Wallace—that they worked it out themselves over a considerable period of time, several weeks or months.” Tolley, "Reminiscences of Howard R. Tolley," 483.

“continuity in the administration of the Department” which was desperately needed during this time of flux.<sup>604</sup>

In his role as head of the USDA, Secretary Wickard continued the USDA’s commitment to fostering democratic practices in rural communities to think about and address public problems through a variety of programs such as discussion work and land-use planning. In his address at the annual meeting of land-grant colleges, he stressed that the number one topic for the USDA was “democracy” with a small “d.” He commented in his address about the importance and role of democracy in agriculture: “I think the agricultural people, the rural people, if you please, have cherished and used democracy perhaps more than any other group of society in this country. So it seems to me that we agricultural leaders have a great responsibility in carrying on the improvement, that may be necessary in the field to which I have just referred.” For Wickard, improving the democratic process relied on discussion and the discussion method employed by the PSD offered the “most practical way of getting people to think about democracy” not individually but together in groups because “thinking is fortunately rather contagious.”<sup>605</sup>

He urged his audience to make this discussion of democracy a “first order of business,” even though doing so would not be easy and, in his mind, he was never convinced that “those discussions were more important than some of the other things” that were occurring within the Department. Even in his calls for greater democracy

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<sup>604</sup> Baker et al., *Century of Service: The First 100 Years of the United States Department of Agriculture*, 273-274.

<sup>605</sup> Claude R. Wickard, “Address by the Secretary of Agriculture,” in *Proceedings of the Association of Land-Grant Colleges and Universities: Fifty-Fourth Annual Convention, Chicago, Illinois, November 11-13, 1940*, ed. William L. Slate (New Haven, CT: Quinnipiac Press, 1941), 76.

and discussion, Wickard subtly began to erode the ardent support for this work found just a couple of years earlier. Drawing his speech to land-grant administrators to a close, he noted the importance of the county land-use planning work and pledged to the Association of Land-Grant Colleges and Universities his “determination to carry on the policies and agreements involved in the Mt. Weather agreement that was started two years ago by Henry Wallace.” How that would look, however, was something that changed with the new USDA administration and the larger political changes on the horizon.<sup>606</sup>

### ***The PSD After Pearl Harbor***

With the bombing at Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, and the American entry into World War II, the work of the PSD took on a new character. Along with virtually every other governmental agency, the USDA shifted its focus to wartime efforts. Importantly, “the program for the encouragement of public study and discussion of agricultural problems, and of the national programs, which have as their objective the solution of these problems, has been continued,” Tolley wrote in his 1941 annual report. He continued by noting how, “[t]his work has seemed particularly needed in a year of strenuous defense effort to safeguard the Nation’s right to its democratic traditions.” He expressed the importance of having citizens be aware of the responsibilities of democratic life. The practice of voluntary assembly of farm men and women embodied in many ways what the United States was fighting for.<sup>607</sup>

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<sup>606</sup> Ibid., 77, 78.

<sup>607</sup> Tolley, *Report of the Chief of the Bureau of Agricultural Economics, 1941*, 35.



But even before the American entry into World War II when concerns about the U.S. role in the conflict abroad were beginning, Taeusch expressed his belief the PSD should play a role in understanding and responding to war. He wrote about the importance of morale and the role that educational discussion work such as discussion groups and Schools had to play in helping citizens understand the possibilities and impact of war, not only on the economy but also on democracy itself. The Division's attitude was that democracy as a way of life was so desirable that they should "allow any criticism of it to be freely expressed." If democracy was to stand up against "alternative methods" of governance emerging elsewhere, acting democratically was one of the strongest defenses against dictatorship.<sup>608</sup>

There was a need "of strengthening the morale of our citizenry" and this could not be done "by propaganda, but must proceed on the basic assumption that confidence can be placed in the judgment of the common man." For Taeusch, the best and strongest public policy in a democratic society was the ability to have "free individual judgments, intelligently stimulated."<sup>609</sup> Democracy begot democracy.

At this point, the PSD was structured in a way that each staff member (numbering about six social scientists in the field) had particular regions and agricultural and rural organizations under their direction.<sup>610</sup> But support on the part of land-grant colleges and Extension was diminishing. By 1942, only 25 states had Extension agents in the position of State Discussion Group Leader, 10 had nominal

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<sup>608</sup> Carl F. Taeusch, "Annual Report of Division of Program Study and Discussion Division Activities, Fiscal Year, 1939-40," *Annual Reports of Divisions of the Bureau of Agricultural Economics* (Washington, DC: n.p., 1941), 4.

<sup>609</sup> ———, "Reply to Eric Englund Memorandum Request of June 8, 1940, June 12, 1940," 3.

<sup>610</sup> Ibid., 4; Lachman, "Democratic Ideology and Agricultural Policy "Program Study and Discussion" in the U.S. Department of Agriculture, 1934-1946", 41.

leaders, and 13 had no leaders at all.<sup>611</sup> Discussion groups continued, partly because of support from other USDA agencies. But the year would be remembered because of its “anti-New Deal Congress” and action taken against the county land-use planning project.<sup>612</sup>

### ***Attacking Democratic Planning***

The 1930s had been a “period of progress” for Wilson, Tolley, and other administrators who saw an opportunity for citizens to play more active roles in democracy through both educational and action-oriented efforts. But the 1940s brought a sharp reversal of their fortunes. The first public attack on the BAE’s planning program came from the Farm Bureau during its 1940 convention in Baltimore when a proposal was put forth stating farmers were becoming increasingly concerned about the redundancies of various government agencies.<sup>613</sup> Long-established relationships between the USDA and the Farm Bureau would soon be challenged.

It was only in January 1939 that Wilson was praising the Michigan Farm Bureau’s support for the Department’s efforts because the Farm Bureau, in Wilson’s language, embodied “good old-fashioned democracy.” Through its partnership with

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<sup>611</sup> Taeusch, "Memorandum to Division Members, March 17, 1942."; Lachman, "Democratic Ideology and Agricultural Policy "Program Study and Discussion" in the U.S. Department of Agriculture, 1934-1946", 41-42.

<sup>612</sup> T. G. Standing and T. Wilson Longmore, *Neighborhood Discussion Groups in Relation to the Farm Security Administration Program in Delaware County, Oklahoma* (Little Rock, AR: United States Department of Agriculture; Bureau of Agricultural Economics, 1942); T. Wilson Longmore, *Neighborhood Discussion Groups in Relation to the FSA Program in Desha County, Arkansas* (Little Rock, AR: United States Department of Agriculture, Bureau of Agricultural Economics, 1942); ———, *Neighborhood Discussion Groups among Low-Income Farm Families in Texas* (Little Rock, AR: United States Department of Agriculture, U. S. Bureau of Agricultural Economics, Division of Farm Population and Rural Welfare, 1943).

<sup>613</sup> Kirkendall, *Social Scientists and Farm Politics in the Age of Roosevelt*, 195.

Extension, “farmer folk who had thought of democracy only as the privilege of voting at elections began the practice of this broader kind of democracy.”<sup>614</sup> But a transformation was occurring in these early years of the 1940s, especially 1942. As one historian has noted, “the Farm Bureau’s cherished belief that its policy was made at the grass roots and adopted by a democratic process turns out to be partly illusion. Decisions were largely made by the board of directors, under the leadership of the forceful vice-president and the persuasive president.” The decisions to be made would be dramatic.<sup>615</sup>

Instead of relying on multiple agencies to support agricultural work, as had been the case through much of the 1930s, the Farm Bureau advocated for the Extension Service to be the medium between the USDA and farmers. Extension had long served in this capacity and farmers would benefit from a return to this approach, Farm Bureau leaders argued.<sup>616</sup> These leaders asked (and supplied an answer to) the question, how could such coordination be achieved?

“There are two broad aspects to the problem—coordination at Washington and coordination in the States, counties, and communities. To achieve coordination at Washington, the Farm Bureau recommends the establishment of an independent, five-man, nonpartisan administrative board, appointed by the President and confirmed by the Senate. This board might properly be called the National Farm Authority. It would report periodically to the Congress and to the Secretary of Agriculture or to the President. The authority would avail itself of the services and facilities of the Department of Agriculture or of any agency of the executive branch of the Government; and the President, by Executive order, should require the Department of

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<sup>614</sup> M. L. Wilson, “The Practice of Democracy” (paper presented at the Farm Bureau Midwest Training School, Michigan State College, East Lansing, MI, January 19, 1939), 1, 3.

<sup>615</sup> Campbell, *The Farm Bureau and the New Deal*, 16-17.

<sup>616</sup> House U.S. Congress, Subcommittee on Agriculture Department Appropriations, Committee on Appropriations, “Agriculture Department Appropriation Bill for 1942. Part 2: Farm Credit Administration, Farm Security Administration, Rural Electrification Administration,” (Washington, DC: United States Government Printing Office, 1941), 407-410.

Agriculture and other proper agencies to make their data and services available to the authority, with all proper safeguards and limitations. The Secretary of Agriculture might be made an ex officio member of the authority, and through him the authority might report to the President.

The problem is urgent. Whether cooperating with the program or not, every farmer in this country is affected by the farm program. Total farm income of some \$9,000,000,000 is involved. One quarter of the population, 32,000,000 people, are affected. Agriculture is the biggest single business in the country.”<sup>617</sup>

The land-grant colleges and Extension were “close to the hearts of the people” and since they were “the very grass roots of agriculture, and they are the very citadel of democracy,” there was little reason to question why Extension should not play such a role.<sup>618</sup> The Farm Bureau’s proposal was the establishment of a national board along with state-level administration centralized in the Extension Service. State Extension directors, in consultation with statewide farm organizations, would submit nominees to the federal-level board.<sup>619</sup> Congress did not go along with the Farm Bureau’s entire proposal, but it did cut the BAE’s budget was cut by \$500,000, even while Extension directors attempted to save this amount in appropriation funding.<sup>620</sup>

On February 6, 1942, Edward A. O’Neal, president of the Farm Bureau, spoke before the Congressional Appropriations Committee. He began by reminding the committee members of his request the previous year for a reduction in what he saw as duplication, overlap, and unnecessary expenditures with respect to the numerous

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<sup>617</sup> Ibid., 410.

<sup>618</sup> Ibid., 411.

<sup>619</sup> Ibid., 417; Hardin, *Freedom in Agricultural Education*, 160-161.

<sup>620</sup> ———, *Freedom in Agricultural Education*, 161-162. The cut was made in the appropriation bill for the 1942 fiscal year. The USDA recommended a budget of \$5,714,000 for the BAE’s economic investigations, but the Bureau of the Budget cut this by \$2,500,000. The House, on recommendation of the Committee of Appropriations, cut the figure to \$2,620,000. The Senate restored this last decrease, but the conference committee returned to the House figure. See footnote 20.

agricultural programs. He echoed these points, stressing repeatedly the importance of focusing energy and support on what would help the United States since it was at war. "In order to win the war, we must mobilize not only our manpower, but all our economic resources," O'Neal pleaded.<sup>621</sup> The Farm Bureau's desire to eradicate the planning powers of the BAE remained one of the central recommendations during his time before Congress. He thanked Congress for their actions the previous year and sought to emphasize they had taken the appropriate action in reducing the BAE budget:

"We wish to commend the action of Congress last year in effecting a substantial saving in the administration of land use planning program.

I wish to inform the committee that we have not had a single protest from any farmer with respect to the curtailment of this appropriation and we believe from our investigation of this matter and contacts with farmers that this entire appropriation for program-planning can be eliminated completely.

We believe that the functions of the Bureau of Agricultural Economics should be restricted to research and fact-finding. It is unwise and unnecessary for the Bureau of Agricultural Economics to build up a large staff reaching out into the States for agricultural planning purposes.

The Bureau of Agricultural Economics is a valuable and useful agency for study of agricultural problems and furnishing facts and information.

We favor the appropriations of adequate funds for these purposes here in the city of Washington."<sup>622</sup>

O'Neal's appeal was a thinly veiled attempt to reduce the BAE's role in rural communities to the furnishing of research-based information. This was in contrast to

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<sup>621</sup> House U.S. Congress, Subcommittee on Agriculture Department Appropriations, Committee on Appropriations, "Agriculture Department Appropriation Bill for 1943. Part 2," (Washington, DC: United States Government Printing Office, 1942), 609.

<sup>622</sup> Ibid., 620.

the creation of new knowledge that was stemming from planning committees, discussion groups, and Schools.

Tolley went before the Senate committee asking for what he called a “very, very simple” request: amend the Agriculture Appropriation Bill passed by the House from \$278,798 to \$1,328,798. The House had reduced the BAE budget by more than \$1,000,000. In an attempt to appeal to the needs of the country, Tolley stressed the work plans for the BAE with respect to the war effort.<sup>623</sup> But Senator Bankhead of Alabama asked Tolley why the House reduced funding for the BAE in the first place. “Generally speaking,” Tolley responded, “the reason assigned was opposition on the part of one of the farm organizations to what they attribute to be an attempt on the part of the Bureau of Agricultural Economics—which they mistakenly attribute to be an attempt on the part of the Bureau of Agricultural Economics—to build an organization of farmers. They are entirely mistaken.”<sup>624</sup>

The give and take of the hearing placed Tolley in opposition to senators who questioned why the BAE was doing work in the field when, as they saw it, it was a fact-finding entity which had mission drift and had taken on work that was most appropriate for the Extension Service. Defending the BAE’s agricultural planning as a collaborative effort with Extension did little to help Tolley’s cause. The record from the Senate Hearing shows the different conceptions of the work of the BAE:

*Senator Nye:* And tell us, in that connection, how you have spent the land-use money in a cooperative way.

*Dr. Tolley:* Yes, in a cooperative way with the State colleges, in order to have the facts that can be obtained only from farm people, in

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<sup>623</sup> Senate U.S. Congress, Committee on Appropriations, “Agriculture Appropriation Bill for 1943,” (Washington, DC: United States Government Printing Office, 1942), 114.

<sup>624</sup> *Ibid.*, 119.

order to know how farm people feel, as well as to have all these facts and figures that are here in Washington—in order to have all of that, in developing advance plans for agriculture and agricultural products and agricultural marketing, and for utilization of lands.

*Senator Bankhead:* Isn't that the work of the Extension Service?

*Dr. Tolley:* We work in this agricultural planning cooperatively with the Agricultural Extension Service. As a matter of fact, the Land Grant College Association and the Department of Agriculture in 1937 entered into a cooperative agreement to work cooperatively together.

*Senator Bankhead:* You are all in the same department.

*Dr. Tolley:* The Department cooperates with the land-grant colleges and the State extension services. We worked cooperatively with them in 1938, 1939; and when the Bureau of Agricultural Economics was reorganized, in 1938, it was given by Henry Wallace, then the Secretary of Agriculture, this function of aiding in the formulation of programs, which we call planning, and the development of cooperation with the land-grant colleges and with the people in the counties and in the communities. That was delegated to the Bureau of Agricultural Economics, and we carefully worked out reorganization papers; and that reorganization, and the new functions of the Bureau of Agricultural Economics, have been carried out since 1938, and were so stated in the agricultural appropriation bill for 1938.

*Senator Bankhead:* Couldn't you get the information you do get, through the mail, from the Extension Service and the other agencies, sent to you in the reports to the Department and to the heads of the Extension Service?

*Dr. Tolley:* I don't think we could, Senator.<sup>625</sup>

Unconvinced that the BAE's work was essential, the Senate committee approved the House reduction:

"We favor the reduction of \$1,050,000 in the appropriation of the Bureau of Agricultural Economics which was adopted by the House, except that we recommend that this reduction be made in the transfers of appropriations from other bureaus instead of the direct appropriation of the Bureau of Agricultural Economics. This reduction is intended to eliminate the so-called regional and local planning activities of the Bureau of Agricultural Economics and the regional and State offices which are maintained by this Bureau for this purpose.... The [Bureau] of Agricultural Economics originally was a research and fact-finding agency to furnish economic information to the Department of Agriculture and to the public with respect to the economic problems of agriculture. In recent years, however, the Bureau of Agricultural

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<sup>625</sup> Ibid., 120-121.

Economics has been projected into the field of so-called “program planning” as a sort of “superplanning agency” to do over-all “planning” for all the other bureaus of the Department of Agriculture and for all the action programs, not only at Washington but out into every State and county and neighborhood. This agency should be restored to its original purpose. It should not be allowed to maintain regional and State offices to duplicate facilities already existing.”<sup>626</sup>

The Senate hearings on funding echoed what occurred in the House. As Jess Gilbert put it, by mid-1942, “the agricultural planning program had failed, or rather was destroyed.”<sup>627</sup> Congress cut off all funding for the planning program, “and with it any hope of unifying, or democratizing, agricultural policy.” But, importantly, Congress did not act alone. Large-scale farmers (particularly Southern planters), some of the USDA’s own agencies (led by the AAA), and the Farm Bureau encouraged Congress to take these actions.<sup>628</sup> Fittingly, the Senate’s Appropriation Bill for 1943 actually increased Extension’s appropriations because of the “heavier new responsibilities which have been placed upon agriculture” with respect to World War II.<sup>629</sup>

Throughout the process, only one Extension director, E. J. Haslerud from North Dakota, testified either for or against the planning program and its potential end.<sup>630</sup> He supported the effort and noted North Dakota’s Extension Service was “very anxious to continue land-use planning work.” For Haslerud, a reduction in the BAE’s funding would “further [necessitate a] reduction in Extension personnel and scope of

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<sup>626</sup> Ibid., 729-730.

<sup>627</sup> Gilbert, “Democratic Planning in Agricultural Policy,” 234. While it is not possible to know the meaning behind the Senate’s actions, it is reasonable to consider the impact of fears about planning as being an essential element of communism. For example, see Marian Kempny, “Nation-Building as a Communist ‘Rational Planning’ Strategy Subverted by Local Narratives. The Case of Identity Politics in Cieszyn Silesia,” *Polish Sociological Review*, no. 152 (2005): 349-350.

<sup>628</sup> Gilbert, “Democratic Planning in Agricultural Policy,” 234; ———, “Rural Sociology and Democratic Planning in the Third New Deal,” 433; Charles M. Hardin, “The Bureau of Agricultural Economics under Fire: A Study in Valuation Conflicts,” *Journal of Farm Economics* 28, no. 3 (1946): 643-644.

<sup>629</sup> U.S. Congress, “Agriculture Appropriation Bill for 1943,” 731.

<sup>630</sup> Hardin, *Freedom in Agricultural Education*, 163.



work when needed most.” But Haslerud stood alone among his peers. Regardless of the communities and farmers impacted by the land-use planning project, the decision had been made.

“The county planning program is buried,” proclaimed Neal C. Gross in 1943.<sup>631</sup> And while one could pin its demise on the influence of the Farm Bureau and the actions of sympathetic members of Congress, Gross suggested that it was because of the “superficiality of the program” due to the “spirit of self-help...never [being] created in the counties.” In his view, the entire project had remained too strongly focused on the USDA administrators who developed the planning program and did not adequately start with the farmers themselves.<sup>632</sup> Yet, even while the *Journal of Farm Economics* was publishing articles about the end of county planning, those within the BAE remained optimistic: “Clinging to their belief in the great value of the work, they hoped that the department would return to it in the future and that, in the meantime, the extension services would continue to operate the planning committees.” Democratic planning had to be kept alive “in spite of all subversive efforts to the contrary,” wrote one BAE representative. But without support and resources, what could be done?<sup>633</sup>

### *A Shared Fate*

The fate of the county land-use planning program would be telling for the PSD. Nevertheless, the PSD continued its work during this period by transforming itself into a more agreeable Division that dealt with war-related topics and themes. Schools,

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<sup>631</sup> Gross, "A Post Mortem on County Planning," 644.

<sup>632</sup> Ibid., 660.

<sup>633</sup> Kirkendall, *Social Scientists and Farm Politics in the Age of Roosevelt*, 216.

discussion leadership training conferences, and the organization and development of discussion groups would “increasingly apply to the problems of winning the war and writing the peace.”<sup>634</sup>

In a memo with a subject line “Division and Diffusion” to Morris Storer, one of the field staff of the PSD, Taeusch suggested what they “ought to be able to do inside the fence of our budget.” This could be accomplished by cooperating more broadly with other Divisions and by “recasting the findings of their research into such form as to be available and appealing to neighborhood study and discussion groups.” Rather than generating their own materials and putting them into leaflets, pulling together others’ research would be a way for the PSD to contribute to the “six or eight problems appointed by Mr. Tolley for war-time concentration.” Taeusch told Storer to give the topics what he called “a war-time cast.” “That would be one obvious way of integrating our work more closely with the total program of the Bureau, and it might commend itself to Mr. Tolley on that basis,” Taeusch wrote to Storer.<sup>635</sup> With the action taken by Congress against Tolley and the BAE, Taeusch was smart enough to make certain the PSD’s work would align with the Bureau’s mission after being partially dismantled. But these efforts were only able to accomplish so much.

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<sup>634</sup> Carl F. Taeusch, “Memorandum to Division Members, Division of Program Study and Discussion, March 2, 1942,” Record Group 83, Box 535, Entry 19, Folder “Division of Program Study and Discussion”, The Records of the Office of the Secretary of Agriculture, National Archives. Even work related to post-war planning activities would face limitations with respect to travel funds for PSD staff. See ———, “Memorandum to Alva H. Benton, Paul L. Vogt, Morris B. Storer, October 17, 1944,” Record Group 83, Box 535, Entry 19, Folder “Division of Program Study and Discussion”, The Records of the Office of the Secretary of Agriculture, National Archives. For examples of discussion playing a role in how citizens thought about war, peace and the role of returning service members, see “Women Discuss Problems in Building an Enduring Peace,” *Extension Service Review* 16, no. 7 (1945); “Building the Peace,” *Extension Service Review* 16, no. 9 (1945); Arthur L. Deering, “Can the Community Act to Meet Vital Problems,” *Extension Service Review* 17, no. 1 (1946).

<sup>635</sup> Carl F. Taeusch, “Memo to Morris B. Storer, August 6, 1942,” Record Group 83, Box 535, Entry 19, Folder “Division of Program Study and Discussion”, The Records of the Office of the Secretary of Agriculture, National Archives.

In a memo to Taeusch, Tolley began by saying how sorry he was to inform him “the funds I am able to make available to your Division for the fiscal year beginning July 1 will be so limited that it will be impossible to maintain all of your present staff.”<sup>636</sup> The cut, as outlined in Taeusch’s response to Tolley, was a one-third reduction from the previous year’s budget. This curtailed the PSD’s budget from \$65,000 to roughly \$43,300.<sup>637</sup> Two of the Division’s six professional staff would be cut while the PSD’s overall work would be greatly reduced. The previous year there had been 22 Schools. But with the new budget, there could only be about 5. Yet, through all of the changes taking place around it, the PSD’s purpose remained the same as before with a slight adaptation to the war context. That was:

“...to strengthen the process of democracy, in war and after the war, by developing a general understanding of basic agricultural problems and public issues through study and discussion so that rural people generally, and the Department staff in particular, may make sound decisions and intelligently participate in planning—long range, war, and post-war, and in carrying out those plans.”<sup>638</sup>

Writing to Taeusch, Storer reflected on ideas the PSD might put into practice during the coming year, “Given an almost completely curtailed, School budget....” He offered four suggestions. The first was to continue to work in the tradition of the Schools but to instead frame them as conferences for interested individuals across organizations and agencies. Second, Storer suggested putting together a handbook on conference organization as a resource based on their experience with the various

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<sup>636</sup> H. R. Tolley, "Memo to Carl F. Taeusch," Record Group 83, Box 535, Entry 19, Folder "Division of Program Study and Discussion", The Records of the Office of the Secretary of Agriculture, National Archives.

<sup>637</sup> Carl F. Taeusch, "Memorandum to Dr. H. R. Tolley, July 1942," Record Group 83, Box 535, Entry 19, Folder "Division of Program Study and Discussion", The Records of the Office of the Secretary of Agriculture, National Archives.

<sup>638</sup> ———, "Statement on Program of the Division of Program Study and Discussion for the Year 1942."

trainings for discussion groups and Schools. Third, continuing discussion leader training conferences was going to require the PSD to be “as discriminating as possible in accepting requests for our assistance,” turning attention possibly to the volunteer neighborhood leader program.<sup>639</sup> Fourth, the PSD could “turn out the best set of discussion guides that can be produced” for the neighbor leaders.<sup>640</sup> In the following years, the PSD continued to redefine its work while remaining committed to its mission of engaging citizens in discussion to help them think and act more democratically about the public problems they faced. But support for this work was losing favor. This was most clearly seen in the incremental decreases and reallocation of funds. Continuation of discussion leadership training conferences would occur, Taeusch wrote in 1942, “so far as possible with the limited funds available.”<sup>641</sup>

The PSD budget reflected reprioritization as well as the BAE’s disfavor with a Congress more sympathetic to the Farm Bureau and its allies than to the Department’s planning agency. This impacted travel primarily, but also the number of staff

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<sup>639</sup> The neighborhood leader program was based broadly on the discussion group work of the PSD in that small groups of men and women gathered together to discuss wartime needs regarding agriculture. An article about the program demonstrated Wilson’s continued philosophy about the work of extension and the USDA more broadly. He wrote, “In developing volunteer local leadership, we must bring together all our knowledge and experience in the physical and social sciences. We must bring to bear upon the problem all that is known of public psychology and behavior of people. We must use to the utmost our ability to choose good leaders and to interest them in assuming responsibility. With the development of neighborhood leaders we are ready to say that if there are fundamental ideas that the Government feels should be carried to every farm family in the United States, we in the Extension Service have the organization by which we can take the message quickly to every rural family by word of mouth.” M. L. Wilson, “Word-of-Mouth Education--a Wartime Extension Job,” in *Neighborhood Leaders and How They Have Functioned, as Reported in Articles Appearing in the Extension Service Review, March 1942 - March 1944* (Washington, DC: Extension Service, War Food Administration, 1942), 5.

<sup>640</sup> Morris B. Storer, “Memorandum to Carl F. Taeusch, “The Division’s Job,” July 21, 1942,” Record Group 83, Box 535, Entry 19, Folder “Division of Program Study and Discussion”, The Records of the Office of the Secretary of Agriculture, National Archives.

<sup>641</sup> Carl F. Taeusch, “Division Activities -- 1942-43,” Record Group 83, Box 535, Entry 19, Folder “Division of Program Study and Discussion”, The Records of the Office of the Secretary of Agriculture, National Archives.

members. In a memo to his staff, Taeusch wrote, "You will note that this practically means no possibility of adding new members to Division staff."<sup>642</sup> This came just a few months after action taken by Congress affected the PSD's budget, reducing travel funds for 1943 from \$4,500 to \$2,880.88.<sup>643</sup>

In a letter to Alva Benton, Taeusch lamented how, "In view of the fact that the Division allotment...was not increased over last year's amount sufficiently to take care of Morris Storer's salary, it will be necessary to restrict travel until further allotments are made to the Division.... We may have additional funds available later, but do not count too certainly on this."<sup>644</sup> Taeusch was right. Three months later, additional funds were denied and he had no other option than to shuffle remaining resources to accomplish the work the PSD had to do. This was October of 1944.<sup>645</sup>

At this point, the PSD had only four staff members, including Taeusch. Nevertheless, they continued work in different regions of the country maintaining, as best they could, relationships with land-grant colleges, Extension, and the Farm Bureau, among other organizations.<sup>646</sup> While these historical partners remained an element of the PSD's work, increasingly other rural organizations such as churches emerged as interested parties in the PSD's commitment to the use of discussion

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<sup>642</sup> ———, "Division Staff Members, Regarding Balances, April 6, 1943," Record Group 83, Box 535, Entry 19, Folder "Division of Program Study and Discussion", The Records of the Office of the Secretary of Agriculture, National Archives.

<sup>643</sup> ———, "Memo to Alva Benton, Budget Adjustment, January 6, 1943," Record Group 83, Box 535, Entry 19, Folder "Division of Program Study and Discussion", The Records of the Office of the Secretary of Agriculture, National Archives.

<sup>644</sup> ———, "Memo to Alva H. Benton, July 6, 1944," Record Group 83, Box 535, Entry 19, Folder "Division of Program Study and Discussion", The Records of the Office of the Secretary of Agriculture, National Archives.

<sup>645</sup> ———, "Memorandum to Alva H. Benton, Paul L. Vogt, Morris B. Storer, October 17, 1944."

<sup>646</sup> ———, "Report of Division Activities -- March, 1945," Record Group 83, Box 535, Entry 19, Folder "Division of Program Study and Discussion", The Records of the Office of the Secretary of Agriculture, National Archives.

methods as a way to better understand and address public problems.<sup>647</sup> While the full-fledged discussion group work of the 1930s was now very clearly in the past, the PSD continued to publish pamphlets relevant to popular concerns among rural populations.<sup>648</sup>

In 1945, the PSD experienced adjustments that would foreshadow permanent change not long into the future. Since being appointed to the post in January 1943 by Tolley, Taeusch had been working extensively with the BAE's Latin-American Training Program.<sup>649</sup> This program introduced foreign government administrators to American agriculture and to the work of the USDA. But his time in this position ended when he had an opportunity to take an assignment in France teaching philosophy at the Armed Forces Institute University. Taeusch's foreign assignment was to be between 7 and 12 months. With his absence from the PSD, Alva Benton stepped up to serve both as acting head of the Division and as acting director of the Latin-American Training Program.<sup>650</sup>

Throughout this period, the PSD continued to align its work with war and post-war efforts. For example, Morris Storer prepared a discussion guide on the World Peace Organization and led discussions on topics such as, "How Can We Prevent

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<sup>647</sup> ———, "Report of Division Activities, November 1944," Record Group 83, Box 535, Entry 19, Folder "Division of Program Study and Discussion", The Records of the Office of the Secretary of Agriculture, National Archives.

<sup>648</sup> See Appendix B for a list of subject-matter pamphlets.

<sup>649</sup> Carl F. Taeusch, "Division Activities -- January, 1943," Record Group 83, Box 535, Entry 19, Folder "Division of Program Study and Discussion", The Records of the Office of the Secretary of Agriculture, National Archives. Later, Taeusch would write on this work. ———, "Toward a Mutual Understanding of Cultures of the Americas," in *Approaches to Group Understanding: Sixth Symposium*, ed. Lyman Bryson, Louis Finkelstein, and R. M. Maciver (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1947).

<sup>650</sup> ———, "Memorandum to All Division Staff Members, June 16, 1945," Record Group 83, Box 535, Entry 19, Folder "Division of Program Study and Discussion", The Records of the Office of the Secretary of Agriculture, National Archives; Alva H. Benton, "Report of Division Activities, June 1945," Record Group 83, Box 535, Entry 19, Folder "Division of Program Study and Discussion", The Records of the Office of the Secretary of Agriculture, National Archives.

Wars?”<sup>651</sup> Additionally, the PSD worked on a variety of projects: with the Federal Social Security Board on a draft of a discussion guide on public assistance (which was one of six such discussion guides on Social Security); the Federal Council of Churches and the Farm Foundation on a manuscript on “The Church and Land Tenure;” and drafting manuscripts for discussion guides on “Soils and the World’s Food,” “The Consumer’s Purse and the Farmer’s Welfare,” “Medical Care and Insurance for Farm People,” and “Hospital Care for Farm People.”<sup>652</sup>

The final chapter for the PSD came in 1946 with the resignation of Tolley as chief of the BAE. By the beginning of that year, the BAE could no longer function as Tolley had hoped. It was now limited to economic research and the collection of statistics, a great departure from what it had been just a few short years earlier. In theory as well as in fact, it had ceased to be what was called the “department’s planner.”<sup>653</sup>

For years, the Farm Bureau had wielded its influence in the halls of Congress regarding a number of agricultural-focused programs and agencies. The BAE often served as one of the Farm Bureau’s targets because of its emphasis on creating structures that empowered farmers to understand issues and to advocate for themselves and their communities rather than go through established interest group organizations. This was in addition to the fact that “[the Farm Bureau] disliked the philosophy of the agency and did not want men with the social scientist’s outlook to play a significant

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<sup>651</sup> Carl F. Taeusch, "Report of Division Activities, May 1945," Record Group 83, Box 535, Entry 19, Folder "Division of Program Study and Discussion", The Records of the Office of the Secretary of Agriculture, National Archives.

<sup>652</sup> Benton, "Report of Division Activities, June 1945."

<sup>653</sup> Kirkendall, *Social Scientists and Farm Politics in the Age of Roosevelt*, 238.

role in farm politics.” Together, members of Congress and the Farm Bureau decided “these social scientists no longer sympathized sufficiently with the aspirations of commercial farmers nor respected adequately the customs of the world they inhabited.” In this light, Tolley’s decision to depart was understandable given the changes.<sup>654</sup>

With Tolley gone, O. V. Wells, a career economist in the USDA, became chief. He would hold this position until the total dismantling of the BAE on November 2, 1953.<sup>655</sup> At that point, the BAE had been prohibited from spending money on state or county land-use planning and USDA Secretary Anderson folded the BAE’s formal policy functions into his office as of January 1, 1946. Congress again was restricting the work of the BAE by forbidding funding for regional offices or for conducting social surveys or research. It was in this context that, in the words of Hardin, “Wells immediately complied by eliminating the regional offices and discontinuing the PSD and the Program Analysis and Development Division.”<sup>656</sup>

For Wells, the BAE was to provide information and be a scientific agency. He did not object to the limitations placed on it. After World War II, the federal government’s relationship with universities was shifting, turning to them as centers of research and development. Federal agencies, starting with the Office of Naval

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<sup>654</sup> Ibid., 239. Kirkendall offers the most detailed account of the long transformation of the BAE and its demise.

<sup>655</sup> On November 2, 1953, Secretary Benson reorganized the USDA and split the BAE into four parts. Tolley wrote about this event as “dismemberment” and as a “real shock.” Tolley asked: “Why are economic information, research, and analysis being subordinated to and intermingled with engineering and soils on the production side, and with marketing services, regulatory activities, and food distribution activities on the marketing side?” O. V. Wells et al., “The Fragmentation of the BAE,” *Journal of Farm Economics* 36, no. 1 (1954): 14. Cf. Larson and Zimmerman, *Sociology in Government*, 30, 32.

<sup>656</sup> Hardin, *Freedom in Agricultural Education*, 175.



Research, began to implement a vision of universities as research centers. The National Science Foundation was established in 1950, marking a clear turning point for the role of American higher education in response to public problems. Books such as George A. Lundberg's *Can Science Save Us?* highlighted the extent to which people thought the scientific method was going to ameliorate public problems. As Lundberg put it, "To those who are still skeptical and unimpressed with the promise of social science, we may address this question: What alternatives do you propose that hold greater promise? If we do not place our faith in social science, to what shall we look for social solutions?"<sup>657</sup>

Statistical research was emphasized; planning and policy decisions were to be made elsewhere, highlighting a particular philosophy about the role of institutions and how experts were to provide scientific and research-based knowledge in order to respond to public problems rather than convene citizens to make sense of the problems themselves.<sup>658</sup> In the words of David Lachman, "The [Farm Bureau's] attack against the BAE was ultimately successful in 1953 when the Bureau was completely

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<sup>657</sup> Charles M. Vest, *The American Research University from World War II to World Wide Web: Governments, the Private Sector, and the Emerging Meta-University* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), 25; George Andrew Lundberg, *Can Science Save Us?*, Second ed. (New York: Longmans, Green, 1961), 134.

<sup>658</sup> Larson and Zimmerman, *Sociology in Government*, 32; Hardin, *Freedom in Agricultural Education*, 176. While writing about the poverty research industry, Alice O'Connor noted that, "The idea that scientific knowledge holds the key to solving social problems has long been an article of faith in American liberalism." As she would say later in the book, in regards to the development of the poverty research industry, it "owed its success...to its disinterested technical proficiency. One reason, no doubt, was its tendency to reduce the most volatile of social problems into quantifiable, individualized, variables—while leaving questions of politics and power unmasked." See Alice O'Connor, *Poverty Knowledge: Social Science, Social Policy, and the Poor in Twentieth-Century U.S. History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 3, 215.

eliminated under the first Republican administration in twenty years.”<sup>659</sup> And with that, the PSD was finished.

Over the course of ten years, from 1935 to 1945, over forty subjects were addressed through USDA discussion group material. The PSD prepared and distributed millions of copies of discussion guides to accompany the topics. The final publication was appropriately titled because of the social, cultural, and political transformation that had occurred during the time period: “World Peace Organization and What It Means to Farm People: An Aid to Discussion of the United Nations Idea.”<sup>660</sup> Final numbers, as complete as possible, suggest that more than 3 million rural men and women participated in discussion groups, tens of thousands of discussion leaders were trained, and more than 122 Schools were held with more than 50,000 Extension workers and other rural community leaders attending.<sup>661</sup>

The breadth of the PSD remains impressive. With a modest staff, the PSD engaged communities across the entire nation. They collaborated with state agencies (notably the land-grant colleges and Extension Service) and with other organizations working with rural communities. The hope from some of the earliest participants in North Carolina that discussion groups would continue indefinitely did not come to fruition. When the initiative was dismantled, it seemed that such attempts at studying

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<sup>659</sup> Lachman, "Democratic Ideology and Agricultural Policy "Program Study and Discussion" in the U.S. Department of Agriculture, 1934-1946", 48.

<sup>660</sup> Jess Gilbert, "Democratic Rationalization: The Ideology of Agrarian Intellectuals in the Third New Deal," *Annual Meeting of the Social Science History Association* (New Orleans, LA1996), 9. For the complete list of topics, see Appendix B.

<sup>661</sup> Tausch, "Freedom of Assembly," 41; ———, "Division Activities -- February, 1943," Record Group 83, Box 535, Entry 19, Folder "Division of Program Study and Discussion", The Records of the Office of the Secretary of Agriculture, National Archives; Lachman, "Democratic Ideology and Agricultural Policy "Program Study and Discussion" in the U.S. Department of Agriculture, 1934-1946", 50.

and discussing complex issues by bringing citizens together would cease for the USDA and Extension. And, in the explicit approach of the PSD, it did. The use of discussion was never exclusive to discussion groups or Schools, but it was one of the most explicit attempts by the USDA or Extension to use discussion as a way to improve rural communities. Speaking years later about the work of the BAE, Tolley expressed how he saw the planning efforts to bring together people to be at the heart of democracy:

“These ideas about farm planning, planning farm programs and citizen participation therein, go clear back to the old original BAE days...and had their culmination, so far as I was concerned, in the Bureau of Agricultural Economics there in 1938, 1939, 1940, and 1941. The activity itself ended with the act of Congress. I feel the philosophy of it which I had some part in developing is basic, and it’s been accepted in a lot of places, as I’ve said, and has stayed. The government is taking part in the development of agriculture in the United States. It will continue to be involved in agricultural matters and agricultural problems. But the government does need to be attuned to what the citizens, what the farmers, consider to be their aims and aspirations and their needs. The government programs are to be worked out in cooperation with the people. That’s democracy. It applies not only to agriculture but to other industries and walks of life. Well, I find I’m proud to have had a little something to do with that.”<sup>662</sup>

What had begun as an idea in the winter of 1934 and continued until 1945 showed the possibility of an educational and democratic approach to thinking about agricultural (and many other) issues. Had organizations such as the Farm Bureau not lobbied so strongly for the dismantling of the BAE, the effort might have continued. But the explicit citizen-centered work of the BAE was too much for an increasingly powerful lobbying body like the Farm Bureau and for a higher education landscape that was increasingly turning to scientific research to fulfill its public mission. The voice for

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<sup>662</sup> Tolley, "Reminiscences of Howard R. Tolley," 702-703.

agriculture in the United States was to be channeled through interest group structures rather than a more unorganized (although more democratic) method as was being played out with land-use planning committees. Instead of relying on local farmers to identify agricultural lands and those that should not be used, decision-making processes were to be made by experts someplace removed in the hall of academia or in Washington, DC.<sup>663</sup>

We could end the chapter here, but the story continued—elsewhere. While not the focus of this dissertation, the demise of the BAE and the democratic work of the USDA did not halt the efforts to democratize planning and to help men and women address public problems through deliberative and discussion-based approaches. Rather than supporting discussion groups in places like Michigan, however, administrators and social scientists from the New Deal era helped to shape the emerging field of international community development. Andrew Jewett has written about the internationalization of the efforts of “left-leaning scientific democrats” who worked in the USDA during Wallace’s tenure this way:

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<sup>663</sup> The formal discussion group work of the PSD and the broader democratic work of the BAE ended, but other efforts continued in states that bore resemblance to these USDA programs. One example is found in Wisconsin where Extension Service administrators were convened for two weeks by the Farm Foundation in order to have “time to think through problems of concern” for extension with the help of outside lecturers. In his opening remarks, H. C. Ramsower thanked M. L. Wilson “for his interest and support” in the bringing together of extension directors, associate directors, and assistant directors from nearly half the states a half a dozen directors from the federal Extension Service. H. C. Ramsower, “Appreciation,” in *Extension Administration: Report of Workshop* (Madison, WI: Extension Service, Farm Foundation, University of Wisconsin, 1946), 1. While Wilson had stepped into the role of director of the federal Extension Service in 1940, he continued to support efforts that shared philosophical roots with discussion groups and schools.

Another example comes from the mid-1960s where we find Michigan State University extension educators utilizing the group discussion approach to help citizens of Michigan “better understand the educational and training needs” that would be necessary for citizens to adapt to change. This effort also provided an opportunity for Michigan leaders “to discuss these problems and to further study and consider action programs to solve them.” See W. J. Kimball, Duane L. Gibson, and Arthur Mauch, “The Michigan Study-Discussion Program,” in *Developing Human Resources in Michigan*, “in *Increasing Understanding of Public Problems and Policies* (Oak Brook, IL: Farm Foundation, 1964), 135.

“They promoted a ‘community development’ model that emphasized local and informal leadership, collective effort, and the preservation of shared values amid growing prosperity. Carl C. Taylor, Douglas Ensminger, M. L. Wilson, and other rural sociologists and agricultural economists applied themselves to the task of building wells, roads, and community centers rather than massive factories and hydroelectric dams. They eventually took the community development program to every village in India, as well as innumerable others around the world.”<sup>664</sup>

The Merrill G. Burlingame Special Collections at Montana State University, home to the papers of M. L. Wilson, highlights Wilson’s commitment to continuing this work internationally. There are extensive records about Wilson’s work in places such as India and Pakistan. In fact, some scholars suggest the primary impact these administrators had was through this international work rather than the domestic attempts made during the New Deal. For historian Daniel Immerwahr, these international development efforts were not simply something these administrators and scholars did after their domestic efforts ended. Instead, this international work was central to their professional identities:

“...even Sarah Phillips, who offers the most comprehensive treatment of this episode, in the epilogue to her book, *This Land, This Nation*, sees the international work of low modernists as a sort of brief coda, and one which generally reprises the main theme of the domestic story: defeat at the hands of the forces of agricultural modernization.... My own research, however, has led me to conclude that the international export of participatory strategies was not just a semi-ironic postlude to the main story. It was the main story. If we want to know low modernists by their works, then we have to acknowledge that they were far more influential and successful abroad than they ever were at home. It was in the global South that they truly made their mark, and the vestiges of the work that they did there in the 1950s are still palpable parts of the political landscape in a number of countries. In the United States, participatory development was the path not taken. Many third-world countries, by contrast, took that path, and they took it under the

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<sup>664</sup> Jewett, *Science, Democracy, and the American University*, 363.

guidance of former employees of the USDA's Bureau of Agricultural Economics."<sup>665</sup>

This, now, seems to be a better place to end. Efforts to engage rural men and women around the issues they faced found favor in far off villages rather than in the Middle West. Community development started in rural communities across the United States as early as the 1910s and was then known as community organization, but it developed with the work of the BAE. Through the efforts of administrators such as Wilson, Tausch, and Tolley, community development and adult education took off during the 1930s and 1940s, showing the possibilities of bringing people together to understand their communities and the challenges they faced.

Through the PSD, they supported efforts to educate men and women so that they might be more informed and knowledgeable about the issues impacting their lives. They helped them to think through various positions on issues. For example, when considering reciprocal trade agreements, discussion materials presented "some of the more important facts and opinions" in order to allow rural men and women to consider whether reciprocal trade agreements hurting or helping the United States. What was best for American farmers? The answer was open for discussion with the USDA simply provided resources for asking the necessary questions.<sup>666</sup>

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<sup>665</sup> Daniel Immerwahr, "The Long Career of Low Modernism: Agrarian Intellectuals in International Development after World War II," *Paper presented at the Agricultural History Society* (Springfield, IL, 2011), 2. See also Sarah T. Phillips, *This Land, This Nation: Conservation, Rural America, and the New Deal* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 242-284; Daniel Immerwahr, "Quests for Community: The United States, Community Development, and the World, 1935-1970" (PhD Dissertation, University of California, Berkeley, 2011).

<sup>666</sup> "Reciprocal Trade Agreements: Hurting or Helping the County?," *Farmer Discussion Group Pamphlet* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Agriculture; The Extension Service; Agricultural Adjustment Administration, 1937), 1.

The PSD rose in status within the USDA only to face the harsh reality that political forces would alter not only its course, but also the democratic work of the Department as a whole. The vision of the USDA in the early years of the New Deal, shaped primarily by Wallace and Wilson, ceased. Following World War II, federal agencies and universities embraced a new course, one that more securely solidified the role of academic professionals as experts who provided technical knowledge to those who could benefit from its dissemination rather than the discussion-based approaches used by Extension agents and PSD staff. Some of the previous work continued to the extent that discussion was a critical element of Extension, but it was in the shadows of scientific research. Research contracts would come to define the relationship between the federal government and higher education. The USDA's approach to adult education using discussion methods became increasingly marginalized as higher education, especially land-grant universities, transformed into research institutions reliant on government and private funds.<sup>667</sup> Within this context, the story about the PSD and the public philosophies shaping its work serves as a narrative that can inform the current debate about civic professionals and the mission, purpose, and role of higher education in our democracy today.

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<sup>667</sup> Vest, *The American Research University from World War II to World Wide Web: Governments, the Private Sector, and the Emerging Meta-University*; Christopher C. Morphew and Peter D. Eckel, eds., *Privatizing the Public University: Perspectives from across the Academy* (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009). Jewett offers an important insight into the discussion work predating this period of transformation in higher education. He writes, "Operating in an era before mass higher education and government-funded 'big science,' they defined their primary social role as that of inculcating in students and citizens both the specific findings of modern science and a set of ethical orientations that these figures associated with science. Although the task required building up the research capacities of universities, most advocates were driven by a combination of political necessity and genuine democratic commitment to frame that research as a contribution to public enlightenment." See Jewett, "The Social Sciences, Philosophy, and the Cultural Turn in the 1930s USDA," 406.

## CHAPTER 7

### CONCLUSION

“In short, life is always *on the way* to narrative, but it does not arrive there until someone hears and tells this life as a story.” – Richard Kearney<sup>668</sup>

“...to find out what we can do effectively in politically uncertain and fluid settings, we need to learn—and to learn, we very often need to ask questions and listen carefully.” – John Forester<sup>669</sup>

#### *A Brief Summary*

In his study on American democracy, Robert H. Wiebe noted how “no important study of democracy appeared in the 1930s” and the one book often cited as the New Deal’s most significant commentary on government, “derisively dismissed the very thought of popular rule.”<sup>670</sup> Richard Hofstadter expressed a similar sentiment about the lack of scholarship on democracy during this period: “While the changes of the Progressive era had produced many significant books of pamphleteering or thoughtful analyses of society...the New Deal produced no comparable body of political writing that would survive the day’s headlines.” A plausible reason for this was that those intellectuals who might otherwise have been busy analyzing the meaning of events were “caught up in the huge expanding bureaucracy and put to work drafting laws that would pass the courts, lobbying with refractory Congressmen, or relocating sharecroppers.”<sup>671</sup>

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<sup>668</sup> Kearney, *On Stories*, 133.

<sup>669</sup> John Forester, “Policy Analysis as Critical Listening,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Public Policy*, ed. Michael Rein Moran and Robert E. Goodin (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 122.

<sup>670</sup> Robert H. Wiebe, *Self-Rule: A Cultural History of American Democracy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 207. The book he was referring to was Thurman W. Arnold, *The Folklore of Capitalism* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1937).

<sup>671</sup> Hofstadter, *The Age of Reform: From Bryan to F. D. R.*, 316-317.



Academic professionals entered the political world in a transformative way, filling essential roles in the Roosevelt administration. They worked alongside career bureaucrats putting into practice ideas that might have otherwise only remained concepts for classroom discussions, too experimental or radical for real life. But the Depression afforded opportunities for experimentation. Many scholars left universities to go to Washington, DC, to do their part to respond to Roosevelt's call following his acceptance speech back in 1932: "Let us all here assembled constitute ourselves prophets of a new order of competence and of courage. This is more than a political campaign; it is a call to arms. Give me your help, not to win votes alone, but to win in this crusade to restore America to its own people."<sup>672</sup> This was definitely true for the government administrators—namely Wilson and Taeusch—at the heart of this story. Rather than writing about the New Deal from offices in Montana or Massachusetts, they were encouraging the cultivation of democracy through discussion and deliberation.

But the fact that many scholars and intellectuals went to Washington, DC, to contribute to the governmental response to public problems does not mean that nothing substantive came from this period regarding the study and practice of democracy. While easily overlooked, publications such as *Democracy Has Roots* by M. L. Wilson contributed to scholarship on both democracy and public administration. In his preface to the book, Charles A. Beard identified what he called a striking feature

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<sup>672</sup> "Text of Governor Roosevelt's Speech at the Convention Accepting the Nomination," 8. Russell L. Hanson notes the term "New Deal" was not an intended name for his approach to government if elected. It was, according to Hanson, "...an alert cartoonist, who picked up on it and used it to refer to Roosevelt's 'program.' ....It was precisely this atheoretical aspect of the New Deal that led Dewey, the philosopher of experimentation par excellence, to repudiate Roosevelt's program." See Hanson, *The Democratic Imagination in America: Conversations with Our Past*, 276-277.

of the volume: “the subject of public administration, so often regarded as lifeless, bound by red tape, and devoid of spirit” was countered by an approach within the USDA to “draw its officials and employees into ‘the large councils,’ to stimulate their interest in the processes of American democracy, and to indicate the relations of detailed performances to the needs and spirit of American society.”<sup>673</sup> Based on lectures to USDA staff by the likes of Wilson and others, *Democracy Has Roots* was an attempt to speak to a bureaucratic organization that was, in certain corners, attempting to create opportunities for citizens to learn about public problems as well as to look inward and to rethink what it meant to be professionals in the USDA. As Beard put it:

“...out of my own observation I can say truly that nowhere in its work have I seen a spirit of bureaucratic regimentation made manifest in word or deed. Social order itself requires laws and rules, but in a democratic society these commands are expressions of popular opinions matured into decisions and accepted in the light of such reason as we can command. The Department of Agriculture operates in this spirit. The pages that follow reflect it.”<sup>674</sup>

As has been demonstrated throughout this dissertation, the democratic experimentation within the USDA problematizes the claim that nothing of substance or of worth came from this time period. Beard’s comments speak to this attempt. While not enjoying widespread readership or appeal enough to be acknowledged by Wiebe or Hofstadter, a title such as *Democracy Has Roots* points to an on-the-ground experience of trying to understand and improve democracy that deserves consideration by scholars and practitioners alike.

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<sup>673</sup> Beard, "Preface," 11, 12.

<sup>674</sup> Ibid., 14.

Supporters of the USDA's discussion groups and Schools were committed to the belief that democracy benefited from an informed citizenry and that professionals had a role in making that possible through educational programs that brought people together. Voting in elections was important, but citizens had a critical role to play in day-to-day affairs if democracy was to be something that went beyond the ballot box. What was needed, administrators argued, were opportunities for men and women to discuss and learn about the complexity of the issues they faced and what they ought to do in response.

This dissertation is an attempt to construct a story that answers the central question in Chapter 1: how did government administrators function as civic professionals committed to helping people become informed and engaged citizens? I draw on historical sources to construct a story of the development and demise of the PSD. This construction gives us insight into what motivated and shaped it. I note at the onset that there were multiple ways to tell and interpret this story. I chose to construct this narrative in a way that highlighted the ideas and work of administrators and educators as civic professionals trying to respond to complicated challenges facing the United States, particularly rural communities.

As a story focused on efforts to make democracy work according to the public philosophies of the government administrators behind discussion groups and Schools of Philosophy, I am particularly interested in the prophetic nature of this story and what continue to be challenges and struggles for professionals or "experts."<sup>675</sup> Where

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<sup>675</sup> Again, I draw on Michael Sandel's description of public philosophy: the political theory implicit in one's own practice and the assumptions about citizenship and freedom that inform one's public life. Sandel, *Democracy's Discontent*, 4.

did motivations come from? What historical factors shaped this experiment with discussion for both rural communities as well as Extension agents? This was a story of what government administrators imagined, what happened, and what came from their efforts.

In Chapter 2, I provided a background to what took place during the New Deal when education increasingly became a critical element of the USDA's work in response to the broadly defined "farm problem." I looked at first days and months of Roosevelt's administration by focusing attention on the USDA and its efforts to bring farmers—and the entire nation—back from the brink of desperation because of the impact of the Great Depression. Looking primarily at the AAA, the philosophy behind it, and the impact it had on citizens, institutions, and the government, this chapter served as an essential introduction to the relationship established between the AAA and Extension. This chapter introduced some of the most important individuals and institutions. These included Wallace and Wilson and the influence their lives and experiences had on them as they led the USDA during the New Deal. It also included the formative period for the Cooperative Extension Service and American Farm Bureau Federation.

Chapter 3 focused on the early work of the USDA in the area of group discussion and the belief that adult education held great promise for citizens to learn about the local, regional, national, and international challenges they faced. There was substantive planning before discussion groups emerged in rural communities across the country, and this chapter explored some of the early questions, disagreements, and ideas about what the potential was for group discussion. Included were details about

what happened, beginning with the first thoughts of farmer discussion groups in 1934, through the implementation phase in 1935 with ten states, and then the nationwide rollout. To ground this trial period, this chapter included a section on discussion group work in places such as rural eastern North Carolina inclusive of the voices of citizens who participated, the local Extension agent overseeing this work, and the response from local newspapers about this promising effort.

Chapter 4 told the story about the PSD and its farmer discussion groups and Schools of Philosophy after the initial trial phase was deemed a success and when the decision was made that the effort should be rolled out nationwide. It was during this period that discussion groups continued to increase and the USDA supported them by producing discussion materials for use by citizens. To better understand what occurred “on the ground,” I focused on Michigan State College’s Extension work with various groups and organizations using discussion methods as well as the organizing of Schools. Helping to contextualize the PSD’s efforts, the story’s section in Michigan was told through the voice and work of William F. Johnston, State Discussion Group Leader in charge of Michigan State’s discussion work with the PSD. In many ways, Johnston embodied civic professionalism because of his on-the-ground involvement with issues, but also because of his own personal transformation in thinking and approach to his work as a professional.

Finally, the chapter included a section on the development of Wilson’s thinking, connecting the on-the-ground experiences in Michigan to the philosophical and conceptual ideas coming out of Washington, DC. It is paramount to connect Wilson’s philosophy behind this work to what was happening in rural communities.

His continuous thinking about democracy and the role of the federal government in bringing about a more democratic society was influenced by reports coming back to the USDA about the PSD's efforts, offering him the opportunity to embrace the pragmatist philosophy of evolutionary learning espoused by Dewey, his favorite philosopher.<sup>676</sup>

Chapter 5 focused on the Mt. Weather Agreement between the USDA and the land-grant colleges and the elevation of the PSD to Division status within the BAE. It continued with the development of the PSD and its relationship with the "action programs," namely the county land-use planning efforts of the Department. This chapter also included a section on the cultural shift in thinking about democracy for both Wilson and Taeusch. The final years of the 1930s served as a critical turning point for both men as they further committed themselves to a conception of democracy that was best understood as being influenced strongly by cultural and social dimensions. Additionally, Wilson articulated his views on the need to look at public problems through multiple lenses and the need to include both experts and non-experts alike in discussions about how to address public problems. While making such a claim was relatively easy, having organizations rooted in certain traditions, approaches, and techniques embrace such a shift was not effortless, as this chapter highlighted.

Chapter 6 focused on the BAE's county land-use planning and, to a lesser extent, the PSD. Many changes took place within the USDA during this period:

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<sup>676</sup> Ansell, *Pragmatist Democracy: Evolutionary Learning as Public Philosophy*, 9-14. According to Ansell, pragmatism identifies three generative conditions for evolutionary learning: a problem-driven perspective, reflexivity, and deliberation.

Wallace and Wilson both moved on from the administration of the Department, the BAE both gained and lost prominence, and World War II redefined the USDA's work as a whole. The PSD was included in and impacted by these changes. A major theme of this chapter was the fracturing of the relationship between the USDA and the Farm Bureau because of tensions around who spoke for American agriculture. While an early supporter of the PSD's work, the Farm Bureau and certain members of Congress began to question the appropriateness of the BAE's democratic planning and educational efforts. There was also a shift in higher education, moving more squarely into the research-intensive paradigm that has in many ways defined land-grant universities since World War II. Finally, after a number of years of diminishing government support, the PSD was closed along with the rest of the BAE. After years of an executive branch being supportive of or at least sympathetic to government intervention and involvement in communities, the election of the first Republican administration since Hoover emphasized the closing of this experimental chapter in American history.

So with the construction of this story, we have a better understanding of how discussion efforts were initiated, supported, and challenged. But we are left with the lingering question of "So what?" What can we learn from this story? What are the lessons? What is prophetic about this story?

### ***Lessons***

In this section, I discuss lessons from this dissertation and shift from "how" to "why" with respect to the government administrators behind discussion efforts within the USDA. As with any intellectual project, one's own interests and concerns play a

critical role in what emerges or is important for him or her. Each reading of this dissertation is inherently different from others. As Scott J. Peters writes, “Each reader will read, interpret, analyze, and make sense of them differently, depending on her or his standpoint, worldview, values, biases, commitments, interests, experience, theoretical lens, and analytical tools and skills.”<sup>677</sup>

While this project has been about telling a largely forgotten story, it is also about contributing to ongoing conversations about the contemporary university engagement and civic renewal movements. I have drawn heavily from those involved in the creation and cultivation of discussion work. In reading their words, we are faced with what Scott J. Peters refers to as the “dual challenge of figuring out not only *what* but also *how* we might learn from them.” I also want to acknowledge that what this section provides is “inescapably partial and selective.”<sup>678</sup> The lessons that follow are not exhaustive and should not be viewed as such. So, finally, why did Wilson, Wallace, Taeusch, and others do what they did?

### **1. Because they thought discussion was the “archstone” of democracy.**

In a brief essay in the Extension Service Review in 1935, Wilson wrote about discussion as the “archstone” of democracy. In architecture, the wedge-shaped piece of stone in the center of an arch is called the keystone or archstone. Physically and

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<sup>677</sup> Peters, *Democracy and Higher Education*, 315. My thinking on this point has been shaped by biblical exegesis and hermeneutics and the acknowledgement that a text does not inherently express the author’s intended meaning. One important way of reading texts is through the positionality of the reader. See Stephen R. Haynes and Steven L. McKenzie, eds., *To Each Its Own Meaning: An Introduction to Biblical Criticisms and Their Applications* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1999).

<sup>678</sup> Peters, *Democracy and Higher Education*, 315, 316.



symbolically, the archstone holds all the other stones in place and plays a critical role in the integrity of the whole arch. If it fails, the entire structure goes as well.<sup>679</sup>

For Wilson, it was critical that citizens discussed and deliberated with one another complex public problems. It is important to note that Wilson, Wallace, and Taeusch placed discussion at the center of democracy rather than formal politics or elections. For Wilson, being a citizen in a democracy meant having the ability and opportunity to turn to the “plain outspoken word” and to discuss an issue “until everybody has had his say.”<sup>680</sup> Put another way by Wilson: “The philosophy of democratic government revolves around the principle that the mass of the people is capable of governing. It is my conviction that a democracy, therefore, cannot be said to be succeeding unless the mass of the people participates in the affairs of government. Only their participation makes a democracy work.”<sup>681</sup>

It should be noted just how radically different the PSD’s work cultivating discussion was from other conceptions of democracy during this period. Articulating what became a dominant view of citizens’ knowledge of political issues, Joseph Schumpeter in his 1942 book *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy* believed that citizens dropped “down to a lower level of mental performance” as soon as he or she entered into discussion or thought about the political world. Education, for him, rarely

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<sup>679</sup> Chris McPhee, "Editorial: Keystone Companies," *Open Source Business Resource*, no. September (2010): 3. For this reason, the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania long ago adopted the nickname of the “Keystone State” because of its central location within the original Thirteen Colonies and also because of the numerous important documents signed in the Commonwealth, including the Declaration of Independence.

<sup>680</sup> Wilson, "Rural America Discusses Democracy," 288.

<sup>681</sup> ———, "Society and the Farmer Have Mutual Interests in the Land," 118.

made a difference. “People cannot be carried up the ladder,” he wrote.<sup>682</sup> His reasoning? Most issues were too removed from people’s lives and, accordingly, they would lack a sense of reality.<sup>683</sup> “Many decisions of fateful importance,” Schumpeter wrote, “are of a nature that makes it impossible for the public to experiment with them at its leisure and at moderate cost.”<sup>684</sup> But, as the previous chapters have demonstrated, there were ways for citizens to become educated about issues of importance.

The production of discussion materials as well as the coordination of Schools by civic professionals put into practice the ideas Wilson, Wallace, and Taeusch had about the role of discussion in democracy. In hindsight, their work offers an alternative approach to Schumpeter’s view of a passive citizenry and government making decisions on their behalf. If democracy was to mean anything, it needed to be grounded in the local community and in discussion among citizens. Importantly, however, the local community needed to be aware of and engaged with the larger realities shaping society—regional, national, and international dimensions. John Dewey famously stated it this way:

“Unless local communal life can be restored, the public cannot adequately resolve its most urgent problem: to find and identify itself. But if it be reestablished, it will manifest a fullness, variety and freedom of possession and enjoyment of meanings and goods unknown in the contiguous associations of the past. For it will be alive and flexible as well as stable, responsive to the complex and world-wide scene in which it is enmeshed. While local, it will not be isolated.”<sup>685</sup>

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<sup>682</sup> Joseph R. Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy* (New York: Harper & Row, [1942] 1976), 262.

<sup>683</sup> Held, *Models of Democracy*, 144.

<sup>684</sup> Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy*, 263.

<sup>685</sup> John Dewey, *The Public and Its Problems* (Athens, OH: Swallow Press / Ohio University Press, [1927] 1954), 216.

The approach that Wilson, Wallace, and Taeusch championed sought to help citizens recognize and understand the interconnectedness of local issues with state, national, and international realities. Additionally, Extension educators, librarians, and other community leaders benefited from opportunities to engage in discussion and to learn about difficult issues in ways that recognized tensions and differences.

**2. Because they thought Cooperative Extension had roots in providing information and facts as well as organizing citizen-centered discussion and engagement.**

Cooperative Extension was a complex and multifaceted institution and Wilson, Wallace, and Taeusch knew that. As pointed out in this dissertation, the purpose and work of Extension has always been contested. Gladys L. Baker's study on county agents and their interest in "parceling out a continuous supply of 'right answers' to immediately pressing farm problems" was and is, in fact, an important element of Extension's educational work."<sup>686</sup> One of Extension's roles was the sharing research-based knowledge. But it was that and more.

Aside from providing technical answers and solutions, Extension has also played a role in helping to develop relationships and cultivate what Ruby Green Smith called "the good life."<sup>687</sup> As Peters has noted, "extension agents were not (and are not today) charged with the exclusive and narrow task of handing out scientific facts and information."<sup>688</sup> There are many examples from Extension's long and rich history to

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<sup>686</sup> Baker, *The County Agent*, 85.

<sup>687</sup> Ruby Green Smith, *The People's Colleges: A History of the New York State Extension Service in Cornell University and the State, 1876-1948* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1949), 544.

<sup>688</sup> Scott J. Peters, *Changing the Story About Higher Education's Public Purposes and Work: Land-Grants, Liberty, and the Little Country Theater* (Ann Arbor, MI: Imagining America (Foreseeable Futures Position Paper #6, published by Imagining America: Artists and Scholars in Public Life), 2007), 11; ———, *Democracy and Higher Education*, 40. Peters situates the service intellectual tradition,

offer glimpses into Extension's narrative that is first and foremost about building a life and culture for Americans. Director of Extension Work Clyde William Warburton, in a 1930 article, expressed this sentiment well:

“For what is the object of extension work? More bushels of corn? More bales of cotton? More pounds of butter fat in the dairy cow's annual record? More quarts of fruit and vegetables canned for winter use? No, these are but means to an end. The end, the object of extension work, is to aid the farmer and his family to improve living conditions on the farm, to provide a more satisfying rural life.... Better crops, better livestock, better food, better clothes, these are among the objects of extension work. But back of it all, the ultimate purpose is to create better homes, better citizens, better communities, better rural living.”<sup>689</sup>

Warburton articulated a belief that Extension was more than improving yields for farmers. But determining how to accomplish the goal of creating better citizens and communities was and is the challenge.<sup>690</sup>

Wilson and others saw the need for and the importance of having the USDA, in partnership with Extension, play a role in helping citizens gather together to discuss issues. Wilson spoke about the objectives of discussion:

“...to create opportunities for farmers to think through for themselves basic problems relating to national agricultural policies which will require decision sometime in the future. The project would be undertaken on the principle that these problems should be discussed and decided consciously with eyes open, and their implications clear rather than in any other way. Democracy has a responsibility of keeping open the channels for the functioning of democracy. The object would not be propaganda, not aimed in the direction of bringing people to any specific or ‘right’ conclusions, but rather through an adult

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which is based on these same core elements of the heroic meta-narrative, within such a narrative. See *ibid.*, 24-28, 52-55.

<sup>689</sup> Clyde William Warburton, "Six Million Farms as a School," *Journal of Adult Education* 2, no. 3 (1930): 292-293.

<sup>690</sup> It should be noted that discussion work from the 1930s and 1940s is largely absent from histories about the land-grant or Extension systems. For recent scholarship on land-grant universities and Extension during this period, see Loss, *Between Citizens and the State*, 53-87; ———, "The Land-Grant Colleges, Cooperative Extension, and the New Deal."

educational process to provide them with means of getting facts, information and opinions which would assist them in reaching intelligent, considered decisions.”<sup>691</sup>

Wilson was emphatic that the government’s role in organizing discussion would be limited to providing resources such as print materials for discussion as well as the staff to organize and lead educational programs—Extension agents for discussion groups and administrators and scholars to coordinate and present to Schools. He spoke about the reality that they could not expect discussion groups to form among “a group of people who have to devote a great part of their time to making a living, unless they have a means of conveniently gathering the facts which will form a basis for discussion.”<sup>692</sup> People could benefit from having resources and materials available to them so that they could have informed discussions about topics that matter to them.

Even while Wilson and others suggested that Extension agents were tired of “preaching” to farmers, their identities were shaped largely by a model of teaching and engagement that positioned them in expert roles that did not include a sense functioning as civic professionals.<sup>693</sup> William F. Johnston, the Extension agent highlighted for his role in Michigan, wrote a letter to colleagues stressing how his own thinking about discussion groups had developed over time and gone from doubt to acceptance:

“At the start of this project, I entertained some doubts as to whether the method could be employed by Extension Specialists, with profit.... Of course the tool is rather new, and like all new tools will have to be used some before expertness is acquired. It is worth trying? During our lives are we not continually faced with more problems that we have the time or information to immediately solve? Are we not therefore constrained

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<sup>691</sup> Wilson, "National Project Discussion Groups and County Forums on National Agricultural Policy."

<sup>692</sup> McDean, "M. L. Wilson and Agricultural Reform in Twentieth Century America", 415-416.

<sup>693</sup> For example, see Wilson, "Discussion Time Is Here."

to sort out the MUST problems, and try to attend to those most pressing? What are the pressing problems in agriculture and rural life today? Which are the ones occupying “Front Stage” position? The lecture and the demonstration as extension tools have a fine record of accomplishment; along comes an extension in extension methods; a new tool, not to supplant, but to aid and reinforce. Shall we give it a trial?”<sup>694</sup>

Discussion work challenged many norms within Extension. But as the efforts in Michigan highlighted, discussion came to have a place in the repertoire of Extension agents’ work with rural communities, although the degree to which they embraced this approach will never be fully known because of scant historical records to convince us otherwise.

Today, there are examples of universities providing resources and materials to citizens so that they might be better informed as they discuss and deliberate issues.<sup>695</sup> In Green Port, the community referred to in Chapter 1, university faculty and Extension agents helped to create deliberative settings where citizens could engage one another around issues of shared interest and concern. Yet, even in a community where the local government requested the university to come in and help organize deliberative discussions, concerns remain about how universities and government agencies convene citizens to discuss and deliberate about contentious topics instead of relying on a panel of experts with prepared statements. The PSD’s work with Extension can serve as a model for others struggling to live out the dilemma of

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<sup>694</sup> Johnston, "Letter to Extension Specialists, Re: Group Discussion: A Method in Adult Education, January 22, 1938."

<sup>695</sup> For example, see *The Rising Cost of Food: What Is Our Food Future?*, (East Lansing, MI: Charles F. Kettering Foundation, Michigan State University College of Agriculture and Natural Resources, Michigan Agricultural Experimental Station, Michigan State University Extension, Michigan State University Public Humanities Collaborative, n.d.).

expertise and democracy.<sup>696</sup> Similar to how Wilson and Taeusch spoke and wrote about the “farm problem” as being complex and multidimensional, today’s problems must also be named and framed as being more than what often easily and superficially appears—even when that complicates and/or delays otherwise expedient technical approaches.<sup>697</sup> The lesson from the work of the PSD is that while it’s difficult and often challenging, it is important for institutions with capabilities to help citizens learn about and discuss issues that impact them.<sup>698</sup>

### **3. Because they viewed the work of the PSD being animated by a different public philosophy from the larger New Deal.**

Viewing discussion as the archstone of democracy and seeing the role that Cooperative Extension, in partnership with the USDA, had in this work relied on a public philosophy that emerged from the broader New Deal efforts. It relied heavily on government intervention in cultural, economic, and political issues. But, importantly, the PSD was a unique understanding of government intervention and action.

Chapter 2 highlighted a theme of transformation taking place within the United States in response to the perceived failed policies that led to the Great Depression and its continued economic impact on the country. The landslide election of President Roosevelt and the Democratic Party could be read as one political party beating

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<sup>696</sup> Bender, *Intellect and Public Life*, 128.

<sup>697</sup> As David Mathews speaks about these challenges, he refers to the problems-behind-the problems and talks about the problems of democracy as inhibiting so many of the problems in democracy. See Mathews, *The Ecology of Democracy*, xvii.

<sup>698</sup> In a recent study on democracy in practice, Xavier De Souza Briggs notes the ability of both “top-led” and “bottom-led” efforts to achieve “defensibly democratic results, as long as leaders on either end focus fairly consistently and pragmatically on the other’s motivations to achieve purpose.” This offers an important perspective when considering the role of institutions such as universities or federal agencies in democratic work. See Xavier N. De Souza Briggs, *Democracy as Problem Solving: Civic Capacity in Communities across the Globe* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2008), 308.

another, simply one of the realities of a liberal democracy. But, as Raoul E. Desvernine noted, “change in political philosophy is quite another.”<sup>699</sup> Broadly speaking, the New Deal did challenge the individualism that had come to define the United States in the 1920s. But the democratic ideals expressed by USDA leaders make the distinction between the New Deal and the earlier Republican administration under President Hoover only helpful in broad terms. Roosevelt’s embrace of experts (or “service intellectuals” to use Richard Kirkendall’s phrase) fit very much with the earlier machine-age ideology that valued experts as the essential actors who could understand and solved public problems in contrast to ordinary citizens with limited technical knowledge. The liberalism of both Hoover and Roosevelt was in line with the dominant paradigm emerging from the Progressive Era, but USDA administrators thought of the role of the expert differently, at least within the context of the PSD.

The PSD was rooted in a theory of democracy that was both an aspirational ideal as well as practical. Wallace, Wilson, Taeusch, and others expressed a commitment to democratic approaches to agricultural problems and policies that put, at the center of that work, citizens discussing and understanding their problems with guidance from professionals helping create and facilitate such opportunities. As Wilson asked in his 1936 presidential address at the American Country Life Association’s annual meeting:

“Is democracy a fixed thing, or is it an evolving, changing idea? Are the concepts of liberty, equality, and fraternity different now from what they were when we lived in a simpler society? Is democracy related to the environment of a people? Did it take one form when we were a nation of frontier farmers, and must it take on different forms now that we have become a complex industrial country with the agricultural

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<sup>699</sup> Desvernine, *Democratic Despotism*, 7.



frontier gone, and most people engaged in highly specialized activities instead of continuing as members of a self-sufficient family unit such as we had 150 years ago? After all, is democracy simply a faith, an attitude on the part of individuals, or is it also a rule for living which must change as the conditions of life itself change?<sup>700</sup>

In such a statement, Wilson challenged two of the dominant narratives shaping the period. First, democracy was a concept that deserved questioning and was not, in his view, something static or settled. He asked this rather bluntly: is democracy a rule for living which must change as the conditions of life change? Experiencing the Great Depression and the much longer recession that had begun years earlier for farmers, many rural people were open to exploring questions about what democracy might look like in the future as regional, national, and international markets and politics were changing what Wilson referred to as a “simpler society.”

Second, Wilson also pushed back against the powerful centralized government bureaucracies that otherwise defined the Roosevelt administration. The growth and development of the federal government, and particularly its many agencies, point to the unique nature of what USDA administrators were attempting to do alongside programs like the AAA. The desire to put citizens at the center of the Department’s democratic work was a shift in thinking from citizens as clients or consumers to citizens as co-creators of public goods of lasting importance. Helen Hill Miller of the PSD captured this sentiment when she wrote, “The forgotten man needs to be remembered, but he needs to be in on the remembering.”<sup>701</sup> The inclusion and participation of citizens is also demonstrated in the writings of another PSD staff

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<sup>700</sup> Wilson, “Education for Democracy,” 9.

<sup>701</sup> Miller, *Yours for Tomorrow: A Personal Testament of Freedom*, 143.

member, Drummond Jones. In an essay entitled, “Can We the People Solve Our Problems?,” he asked:

“Shall we the people wait until a few leaders furnish us their answers to our questions, or shall we think these things out for ourselves? Is it possible for people in a democracy to arrive at solutions to their problems by their own efforts and then put their solutions into practice? Will the choice of methods we use in trying to solve these problems have a bearing on the results we may obtain? Finally, will deliberate thinking by the people themselves furnish solutions more satisfying than those solutions we obtain by waiting for others to form conclusions for us?”<sup>702</sup>

Under the heading “How Can We Devise More Effective Methods of Problem-Solving?,” Jones further demonstrated the extent to which the discussion efforts of the PSD attended to one of the most central elements of adult education: who determines and defines the needs of those to be educated? He noted how, “No method of education can be effective unless it grows out of the conscious needs of us who are to be educated.” Discussion represented not only an effective learning device, as he called it, but it was also a concrete example of democracy in action. Jones continued: “When men think they begin to plan, to propose solutions, to test new ideas. In essence, democracy is planning; men and women do not prefer chaos or anarchy.... Above all, through discussion, planning becomes the right of people themselves—they depend upon no one person to plan for them.”<sup>703</sup>

There was a role for professionals with expertise and technical knowledge, but that role was in relationship to the group. It was in a discussion group setting that people were able to “exploit the usefulness of expert knowledge” so that better

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<sup>702</sup> A. Drummond Jones, “Can We the People Solve Our Problems?,” in *Handbook for Discussion Leaders: America's Problems as Affected by International Relations*, ed. Ursula P. Hubbard (New York: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 1940), 88.

<sup>703</sup> Ibid., 89, 91, 92.

decisions might be made. Leadership remained in the group, not exclusively with experts.<sup>704</sup> Much like David Mathews' notion of "leaderful communities" with citizens at the center of political life, Jones and the other PSD leaders expressed a philosophy rooted in the belief that citizens had knowledge and capabilities not only worthy of inclusion, but knowledge and capabilities critical for making good decisions. The role of discussion in this context was to help further develop that knowledge since comprehending the nature of problems was "more than a requirement for educational success—it [was] a basic principle of democracy itself."<sup>705</sup>

Wilson, more than anyone else, embraced a philosophy that did not disconnect the two; that is, knowledge and capabilities. The passion and commitment to educating citizens for democracy shaped everything he did and thought with respect to the USDA's work. His identity was wrapped up in this democratic enterprise. His wholehearted embrace of the cultural approach demonstrated this commitment, one that had developed since his childhood days when he experienced the value of differences and democratic approaches to resolving issues.<sup>706</sup>

Different public philosophies informed thinking about the roles of citizens and that of experts, leading to different conceptions of democracy. The final section, in many ways, is a continuation of this discussion about the role of public philosophies in shaping one's work.

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<sup>704</sup> Ibid., 92.

<sup>705</sup> Ibid., 94.

<sup>706</sup> We should also include Wallace and Taeusch in this acknowledgement of the long development which shaped their thinking in the New Deal. They each, in their own ways, brought philosophical and reflective perspectives to the work of the USDA.

### *Different Politics, Philosophies, and Stories*

In the opening line of the preface of his book *The Political Philosophy of the New Deal*, Hubert H. Humphrey wrote, “More than anything else, the New Deal was a change in the scope of public responsibility, particularly in the spheres of economic and social action.”<sup>707</sup> Humphrey’s statement about responsibility is central. Who was to be responsible for democracy and the cultivation of opportunities for citizens to gather together to discuss and eventually act on issues of shared importance?

As stated in Chapter 1, the purpose of this study has been to contribute to two interrelated conversations: the university engagement movement and the civic renewal movement by focusing on a story about a deliberative democracy effort led by civic professionals. Universities have long been successful in fulfilling the role of the research institution but have been less articulate when it comes to expressing their civic mission and purposes.

In the midst of a national dialogue on the scholarship of engagement, a critical “next step” is to “shift the discourse about scholarly engagement from a linear notion of the university that extends itself to communities to a systemic notion of discourse and praxis that is shared by the university, community, and service institutions.”<sup>708</sup> It remains common to think about the educative and civic role of land-grant universities as being aligned with technical rationality, one of higher education’s dominant paradigms, which defaults to viewing technical expertise as more important than other

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<sup>707</sup> Hubert H. Humphrey, *The Political Philosophy of the New Deal* (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 1970), ix.

<sup>708</sup> Cheryl L. Rosaen, Pennie G. Foster-Fishman, and Frank A. Fear, "The Citizen Scholar: Joining Voices and Values in the Engagement Interface," *Metropolitan Universities: An International Forum* 12, no. 4 (2001): 10.

ways of knowing.<sup>709</sup> The brief story about Green Port, Michigan, in Chapter 1 highlights the challenges facing those who approach their work in ways that counter this framework.

Frank Fear, a scholar and practitioner of university engagement has written about the importance of understanding engagement as hospitality and a search for connectedness with the people with whom he works. He has written how “engagement at its best occurs when people share thoughts and feelings expressively, openly, and respect-fully; and [when] they enjoy spending time together and participating in mutual exchange.”<sup>710</sup> For him, engagement is a relationship among, what he refers to as, significant others. Fear comes not only as an academic professional bringing technical knowledge (he does have such expertise and draws upon it), but also as a civic professional seeking to be in conversation and relationship with others. Looking back to William F. Johnston during the 1930s, we see certain similarities between the two educators attempting to help citizens in Michigan at two different times understand and address the problems facing their communities.

For higher education broadly speaking, and for the land-grant university and Extension Service more specifically, Scott J. Peters has argued that there must be a shift from a politics rooted in a thin version of liberal political theory, that gives priority to individual rights and professes neutrality toward the values and ends

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<sup>709</sup> Frank A. Fear and Lorilee R. Sandmann, "The “New” Scholarship: Implications for Engagement and Extension," *Journal of Higher Education Outreach and Engagement* 7, no. 1 & 2 (2001-2002): 32. Technical rationality dominates many domains—both within higher education and beyond. Governments have long embraced technical rationality with corresponding consequences. See Scott, *Seeing Like a State*; Bent Flyvbjerg, *Making Social Science Matter: Why Social Inquiry Fails and How It Can Succeed Again* (York: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

<sup>710</sup> Frank A. Fear, "Coming to Engagement: Critical Reflection and Transformation," in *Handbook of Engaged Scholarship: Contemporary Landscapes, Future Directions*, ed. Hiram E. Fitzgerald, C. Burack, and Sarena D. Seifer (East Lansing, MI: Michigan State University Press, 2010), 481.

citizens pursue, to a “formative politics that while not abandoning concern for economics, technical efficiency, and mobility, also places such concerns and aims in relation to larger questions of social political, and moral purpose.”<sup>711</sup> This reflects a simple, but important premise: different kinds of politics are tied to and shaped by different public philosophies. For both individuals and institutions, the public philosophy we choose to embrace and the public philosophies we reject “carries major implications for how we understand the nature and purpose of public life and our personal and/or institutional/professional roles in it, and how we judge which kinds of politics are and aren’t ‘good.’”<sup>712</sup>

The efforts of Wilson, Wallace, and Taeusch to expand how issues were named, framed, and addressed point to a time when government administrators embraced a public philosophy that valued citizens as deliberative and engaged actors rather than seeing them as passive recipients or consumers of expert decisions. The response from land-grant university administrators, Extension agents, the Farm Bureau, and certain members of Congress also highlights how impactful different philosophies truly are. This matters because different politics are formed by different public philosophies that shape both ideas and work, positively and negatively.

Related to different politics and philosophies are stories. The ways we story and restory narratives about an institution such as the land-grant university are “based on different conceptions of and claims about its public purposes and mission.”<sup>713</sup> How

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<sup>711</sup> Scott J. Peters, "The Formative Politics of Outreach Scholarship," *Journal of Higher Education Outreach and Engagement* 6, no. 1 (2000): 26.

<sup>712</sup> Peters, Alter, and Shaffer, "Year Two Research Report: Cooperative Extension's Roles in Cultivating and Sustaining Democratic Publics," 12.

<sup>713</sup> Peters, "Storying and Restorying the Land-Grant System," 335.

we speak and write matters. There are implications for what work occurs based on the stories we hear and tell. Peters' offers three ways of storying the land-grant institution. These categories include: a heroic meta-narrative about the good that comes from science-based service, a tragic counternarrative about the abuse of power by administrators and institutions, and a prophetic counternarrative based on a hopeful story about the possibilities of struggles for "freedom and sustainability."<sup>714</sup>

We could tell this story as a heroic narrative about the good ideas administrators had for citizens and the democratic possibilities coming from the USDA and land-grant system. We could also tell it as a tragic narrative because we could focus on the ways the democratic dimensions of the PSD lost out to technocratic and academic approaches to public problems alongside real opponents to such a restructuring of political dynamics. But a prophetic lens is appropriate because government administrators saw the important role institutions like land-grant universities and Extension could play in cultivating democratic life in rural communities, even in the face of real opposition. It was not ideal. Rarely is it. We stand to benefit when our narratives are honest and truthful about the complexities and contradictions that permeate them. Such a view challenges and shakes complacency about what it meant and what it means to be civic professionals in a democratic society.

The prophetic work told in this story is rooted in the idea that discussion and the deliberation of ideas are paramount. But as David Mathews has written in *Politics for People*, deliberation is only a preliminary form of action, a necessary but not

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<sup>714</sup> Ibid., 347.

sufficient condition for getting results. Deliberation, in Mathews' words, "helps us look before we leap."<sup>715</sup> It helps citizens understand facts but also values. After gaining knowledge about something, what does it mean? What is its worth? In a democratic society, asking these questions in the company of others is an important task that should not be dismissed. It also creates new senses of self and others, as well as a new "we."<sup>716</sup>

With respect to higher education and the broader civic renewal movement, we are confronted with the belief that decisions *should* not be made without citizens having an opportunity to understand and engage the issues. As Mathews points out, "Politics is certainly about solving common problems, but it is more. Although politics is practical, it is not purely instrumental. Politics is a creative activity in that it has to do with building the kind of community and country we want for ourselves and our children.... To repeat, politics is about transformation, not just transactions."

Discussion helps to provide facts, but it also moves us beyond a level of discussion that is purely information. It moves us "to things no book or expert can tell us, to what is most important to us in our common life."<sup>717</sup> For farmers in North Carolina in 1935 and in Michigan in 1936, discussion groups cultivated spaces for them to come together, listen, learn, and weigh their decisions against other viable options. While discussion groups and Schools were often viewed as complements to the more explicit action programs of the USDA, they were primarily for citizens to gather together and

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<sup>715</sup> Mathews, *Politics for People*, 182.

<sup>716</sup> For compelling accounts of such efforts, see Parker J. Palmer, *Healing the Heart of Democracy: The Courage to Create a Politics Worthy of the Human Spirit* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2011); Marshall Ganz, "Why Stories Matter: The Art Craft of Social Change," *Sojourners Magazine*, 2009/03// 2009.

<sup>717</sup> Mathews, *Politics for People*, 224.



discuss issues of importance to them as individuals, as a community, and as a broader society. While temporary in duration, the PSD demonstrated the possibility of a more deliberative and engaged form of politics.<sup>718</sup>

Decades later, Wendell Berry called for the broadening of thinking about agricultural issues because to name them as “solely a problem of production or technology or economics — is simply to misunderstand the problem, either inadvertently or deliberately, either for profit or because of a prevalent fashion of thought. The whole problem must be solved, not just some handily identifiable and simplifiable aspect of it.”<sup>719</sup> We too often only see the narrowness of a particular perspective and fail to recognize complexity and interconnectedness as demonstrated so profoundly in agricultural life.<sup>720</sup>

Without naming it, Berry articulated one of the elements at the heart of the philosophy behind discussion groups and Schools: problems were complex and people needed to understand their multiple dimensions. Drawing on a public philosophy committed to education being an essential element of democracy, citizens being active participants and contributors to public life, and complex problems requiring deliberation about facts and values, Wilson, Wallace, Taeusch, and others sought to

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<sup>718</sup> In recent years, there have been calls for government to play a greater role in enabling citizen participation and civic engagement. See Carmen Sirianni, *Investing in Democracy: Engaging Citizens in Collaborative Governance* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2009). Importantly, other scholars have cautioned against conflating top-down approaches with those that emerge more organically from the grassroots. See Nina Eliasoph, "Top-Down Civic Projects Are Not Grassroots Associations: How The Differences Matter in Everyday Life," *Voluntas: International Journal of Voluntary & Nonprofit Organizations* 20, no. 3 (2009).

<sup>719</sup> Wendell Berry, "Solving for Pattern," in *The Art of the Commonplace: The Agrarian Essays of Wendell Berry*, ed. Norman Wirza (Berkeley: Counterpoint, 2002), 269.

<sup>720</sup> Bob Pepperman Taylor, *Citizenship and Democratic Doubt: The Legacy of Progressive Thought* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2004), 111.

remake and strengthen democracy by cultivating and sustaining opportunities for discussion. This relied on civic professionals to realize this vision.

Wilson and others did this work as government employees who believed that solving problems went along with helping people view themselves as citizens. It was part of their professional identities. They wanted to improve rural life and the “farm problem,” but they did not want to do it at the expense of having rural men and women sidelined. Eric Liu and Nick Hanauer, authors of *The Gardens of Democracy*, have expressed a sentiment similar to that of the USDA administrators at the heart of this study: “We need strong government. We need strong citizens.”<sup>721</sup> Returning to that preliminary report from 1935 described earlier in this dissertation, we can confidently say that these administrators did go the cracker box or hot stove sessions at least one better because they viewed farmers, professionals, and themselves as civic actors cultivating democracy through discussion and deliberation.<sup>722</sup>

Finally, we benefit by returning to Alasdair MacIntyre who insightfully stated, “I can only answer the question ‘What am I to do?’ if I can answer the prior question ‘Of what story or stories do I find myself a part?’”<sup>723</sup> MacIntyre reminds us that we are part of what is already in existence and we are shaped by what has come before. This prophetic story about government administrators creating opportunities for discussion is an important one for those in higher education and for those who see themselves as part of the civic renewal movement. I conclude with a line borrowed from Thomas

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<sup>721</sup> Eric Liu and Nick Hanauer, *The Gardens of Democracy: A New American Story of Citizenship, the Economy, and the Role of Government* (Seattle: Sasquatch Books, 2011), 7.

<sup>722</sup> United States Department of Agriculture, *Preliminary Report of the Forum and Discussion Group Project*, 27, 25.

<sup>723</sup> MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 216.

King: “Take [this] story, for instance. It’s yours. Do with it what you will. Make it a topic of a discussion at a scholarly conference. Put it on the Web. Forget it. But don’t say in the years to come that you would have lived your life differently if only you had heard this story. You’ve heard it now.”<sup>724</sup>

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<sup>724</sup> King, *The Truth About Stories*, 60.

## APPENDIX A

### THEMES AND TOPICS IN GROUP DISCUSSIONS, 1935-1936

This is the list of county forum themes and discussion group topics that were used in discussion group efforts between December of 1935 and March 1936. Experiences of farm groups in various sections of the country indicated, “many of these subjects are matters of common interest to the country as a whole.” The USDA also prepared what were referred to as “Source Folders” for those convening county forums and/or discussion groups. Additionally, these topics were addressed on a radio program coordinated by the Department.<sup>725</sup>

First Half of December 1935. County Forum Theme: “The Farm Depression.” Local Discussion Group Topics:

1. “What is the Chief Cause of the Farm Depression?”
2. “Do Farmers Want the Federal Government to Deal with Farm Problems?”

Last Half of December, Holiday Period, First Half of January 1936. County Forum Theme: “The Farmer and World Trade.” Local Discussion Group Topics:

1. “Should American Agriculture Seek Recovery of World Markets or Arrange to Live at Home?”
2. “What Kind of Foreign Trade Policies do American Farmers Want? In Peace Time? In War Time?”

Last Half of January. County Forum Theme: “The Balance between City and Country.” Local Discussion Group Topics:

1. “What Kind of Industrial Policy is Best for Agriculture?”
2. “The Farmer and the Consumer of Farm Products—What, If Any, Are Their Responsibilities to One Another?”

First Half of February. County Forum Theme: “Protection for Industry and Agriculture.” Local Discussion Group Topics:

1. “Do Farmers Want High Tariffs on Farm Products? On Industrial Goods?”
2. “Should Farm Benefit Payments be Abolished?”

Last Half of February. County Forum Theme: “Fair Farm Prices.” Local Discussion Group Topics:

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<sup>725</sup> This list is found in at least two sources: Extension Service and Agricultural Adjustment Administration, *How to Organize and Conduct County Forums* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1935), 4-5; Cooperative Extension Work et al., *Rural Discussion Groups for Iowa, 1935-1936* (Ames, IA: Iowa State College of Agriculture Extension Service, 1935), 8-9.

1. "Farm Prices—How Are They Made?"
2. "What Kind of Land Prices Would Be Best for Agriculture? For the Nation as a Whole?"

First Half of March. County Forum Theme: "Future Agricultural Programs." Local Discussion Group Topics:

1. "Will Crop Adjustments be Necessary or Desirable in Years to Come?"
2. "What Possibilities and Limitations do Farmers of this County Face in Seeking a Better Balance in Farm Production?"

Last Half of March. County Forum Theme: "Rural Life in the Future." Local Discussion Group Topics:

1. "What Objectives are Desirable for Farming—As a Business? As a Way of Life?"
2. "What Should Farmers Seek to Accomplish Through Organization?"

## APPENDIX B

### COMPLETE LIST OF PSD PAMPHLETS, 1935-1945

What follows is a complete list of the materials produced by the PSD over the course of its existence. The pamphlets themselves varied in both length and size, with most of the early pamphlets being ten to fifteen pages long and about five by eight inches in size, while some of the later pamphlets were about sixty pages in length. Reflective of the changes impacting the PSD and its work, the final materials were considerably shorter and only a few pages long and about nine by twelve inches in size.<sup>726</sup>

#### **Methodological Pamphlets**

- D-1. Discussion: A Brief Guide to Methods [1935]
- D-2. How to Organize and Conduct County Forums [1935] and Suggestions for County Extension Workers on Forum and Discussion Groups (Mimeographed)
- D-3. What is the Discussion Leader's Job? [1937]
- D-4. Group Discussion and Its Techniques [1942]
- D-5. Organization of Groups for Discussion and Action [1942]
  
- DN-1. Suggestions for Discussion Group Members
- DN-2. Suggestions for Group Discussion Leaders
- DN-3. Suggestions for County Extension Workers on Forum and Discussion Groups
- DN-4. Suggestions for Panel Discussions

#### **Subject Matter Pamphlets for the 1935-1936 Season**

In the early phase of discussion groups during the 1935-1936 discussion group season, subject matter pamphlets were divided into several series. Each had a distinct prefix: "DA" for members use before meetings (described as "brief eight-page circulars"), "DB" for leaders and for members who wanted follow up reading (about fifteen to thirty pages long), and "DC" for leaders. Those pamphlets were titled:

- DA-1. What is the Chief Cause of the Farm Depression?

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<sup>726</sup> The existence of this list of PSD pamphlets is due, in large part, to David Lachman's meticulous scholarship. During my own research at the National Archives, I utilized his master's thesis as a checklist to ensure that his listing of the pamphlets was exhaustive. To do so, I went through primary sources and generated my own list of these materials. I then compared them to Lachman's work. See Lachman, "Democratic Ideology and Agricultural Policy "Program Study and Discussion" in the U.S. Department of Agriculture, 1934-1946", 57-59; Clyde William Warburton and Donald C. Blaisdell, "Memorandum to State Extension Directors Regarding Progress of the Discussion Group Project," Record Group 16, Box 5, Entry 34, Discussion Group - Miscellaneous, The Records of the Office of the Secretary of Agriculture, National Archives, 2; Cooperative Extension Work et al., *Rural Discussion Groups for Iowa, 1935-1936*, 8-12.

- DA-2. Do Farmers Want the Federal Government to Deal with Farm Problems?
- DA-3. Should American Agriculture Seek Recovery of World Markets Live at Home?
- DA-4. What Kind of Foreign Trade Policies Do American Farmers Want? In Peace Time? In War Time?
- DA-5. What Kind of an Industrial Policy is Best for Agriculture?
- DA-6. The Farmer and the Consumer of Farm Products—What if any, are Their Responsibilities to One Another?
- DA-7. Do Farmers Want High Tariffs on Farm Products? On Industrial Products?
- DA-8. Should Farm Benefit Payments be Abolished?
- DA-9. Farm Prices—How are They Made?
- DA-10. What Kind of Land Prices would be Best for Agriculture? For the Nation as a Whole?
- DA-11. Will Crop Adjustment be Necessary or Desirable in Years to Come?
- DA-12. What Possibilities and Limitations do Farmers in this Country Face in Seeking a Better Balance in Farm Production?
- DA-13. What Objectives are Desirable for Farming as a Business? As a Way of Life?
- DA-14. What Should Farmers Seek to Accomplish through Organization?
  
- DB-1 to DB-14. Same topics as above but more complete discussion of each subject.
  
- DC-1 to D-7. Folders of materials that functioned as source books, covering two topics each, and consisted of assembled literature on each of the series questions for use by discussion group leaders.

### **Subject-Matter Pamphlets for the 1936-1937 Season**

Beginning with the 1936-1937 discussion group season, the PSD switched to the “DS” series of longer pamphlets which were up to sixty pages:

- DS-1. What Should Be the Farmers' Share in the National Income?
- DS-2. How Do Farm People Live in Comparison with City People?
- DS-3. Should Farm Ownership Be a Goal of Agriculture Policy?
- DS-4. Exports and Imports--How Do They Affect the Farmer?
- DS-5. Is Increased Efficiency in Farming Always a Good Thing?
- DS-6. What Should Farmers Aim to Accomplish Through Organization?
- DS-7. What Kind of Agriculture Policy Is Necessary to Save Our Soil?
- DS-8. What Part Should Farmers in Your County Take in Making National Agriculture Policy?

### **Subject-Matter Pamphlets for the 1937-1938 Season**

- DS- 9. Taxes: Who Pays, What For?
- DS-10. Rural Communities: What Do They Need Most?
- DS-11. Soil Conservation: Who Gains By It?
- DS-12. Co-ops: How Far Can They Go?
- DS-13. Farm Finance: What Is a Sound System?
- DS-14. Crop Insurance: Is It Practical?
- DS-15. Reciprocal Trade Agreements: Hurting or Helping the Country?
- DS-16. Farm Security: How Can Tenants Find It?

### **Additional Subject-Matter Pamphlets**

- DS-17. The National Farm Program. What About Cotton? [1938]
- DS-18. The National Farm Program. What About Wheat? [1938]
- DS-19. Getting at the Facts About Agriculture: Program Building [1940]
- DS-20. Surplus Farm Products—Where Shall We Find a Market? [1941]
- DS-21. Getting Established on the Land [1941]
- DS-22. Let's Talk About Milk Production for a World at War [1943]
- DS-23. Let's Talk About Farm Labor for the Wartime Job [1943]
- DS-24. Let's Talk About When Joe Comes Home and Comes Back to the Farm
- DS-25. Let's Talk About Buying and Selling Farm Products Abroad [1944]
- DS-26. Let's Talk About Timber Supplies [1945]
- DS-27. Let's Talk about Farm Leases and How They Can Be Improved [1945]
- DS-28. World Peace Organization and What It Means to Farm People, An Aid to Discussion of the United Nations Idea [1945]



## APPENDIX C

### METHODOLOGICAL PAMPHLETS, DN-1 AND DN-2

Published as pamphlets DN-1: Suggestions for Discussion Group Members and DN-2: Suggestions for Group Discussion Leaders. These resources were for both group discussion leaders and participants.

DN-1

#### SUGGESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION GROUP MEMBERS

**1. Speak your mind freely.**

The discussion meeting is yours—a chance for you to say what you think. Say it. Your ideas count. Here “everyone’s idea is worth just as much as everyone else’s, and a good bit more than some.”

**2. Listen thoughtfully to others.**

Try hard to get the other man’s point of view—see what experience and thinking it rests on. Remember: On almost every question there are three points of view—yours, mine, and the right one.

**3. Keep your seat when you speak.**

Whether you are group member or leader, don’t stand up to speak. The discussion meeting is not a place for speeches. Informality is the rule here.

**4. Don’t monopolize the discussion.**

Don’t speak for more than a minute or so at a time. Give others a chance. Dig for things that *matter*. Make your point in a few words, then pass the ball to someone across the circle. If discussion lags, help the leader put questions that will draw others out.

**5. Don’t let the discussion get away from you.**

If you don’t understand where it’s going, say so. Ask for examples, cases, illustrations until you *do* understand. Try to tie up what is being said with your own experience and with what you have heard and read.

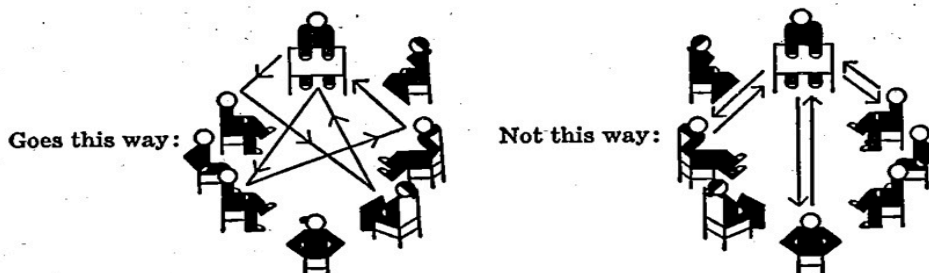
**6. Indulge in friendly disagreement.**

When you find that you’re on the other side of the fence from the discussion, say so and tell why. But disagree in a *friendly* way. There’s one truth that everyone’s after. Good-humored discussion leads part way there.

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PROGRAM STUDY AND DISCUSSION SECTION  
WASHINGTON, D. C.

**7. Strike while the idea is hot.**

Don't wait for the leader to recognize you before speaking. If several want to speak at once, it's his job to grant the floor to one, give the others a chance later. Your ideal discussion—



**8. Come to the discussion with questions in mind.**

Make note of questions and points of disagreement that occur to you during advance reading or listening, and raise them during the discussion. Farm papers, the daily press, lectures, public forums, the radio, etc., are good sources for clippings and notes to be used at discussion meetings.

**9. Go ahead from discussion to study.**

Remember that discussion is just the first step—an important one, but still just a starter. If your thinking is stirred up by the discussion here, seek out materials for further study on the problems. Ask your County Agricultural Agent, Home Demonstration Worker, or State Discussion Leader about reference materials. Call on them, too, for help in organizing a county-wide discussion movement, training leaders, etc.

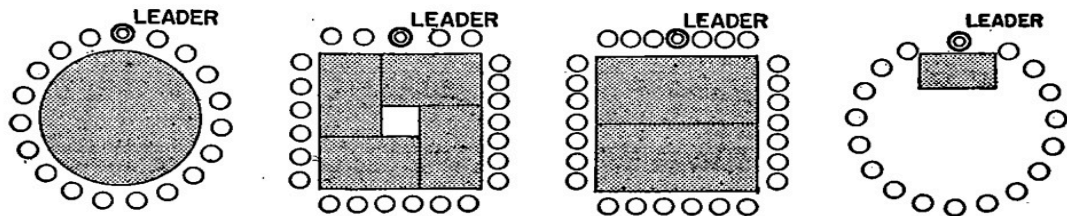
**10. Why not group discussion at home?**

All over the country farm men and women are gathering, often in farm homes, for discussion of public problems under local leaders. Some are using the best discussion and forum programs of the air as springboards for continuing discussion. Why not a neighborhood discussion group in your home?

## SUGGESTIONS FOR GROUP DISCUSSION LEADERS

### GETTING READY

1. Arrange group in circle, so each person can see every other person.
2. Provide table space, if convenient, for leader and entire group, as e. g.:



3. Let all stay seated during discussion, including leader. Keep it informal.
4. Start by making everybody comfortable. Check ventilation and lighting.
5. See that everybody knows everybody else. At first gathering go 'round the circle, each introducing himself. As a newcomer joins group later, introduce yourself to him and him to the group.
6. Learn names of all as soon as you can.
7. Have blackboard, chalk, and eraser ready for use in case of need. Appoint a "blackboard secretary" if the subject-matter and occasion make it desirable.
8. Start on time, and close at prearranged time.
9. In opening, emphasize: *Everyone* is to take part. If one single member's view fails to get out in the open, insofar the discussion falls short.
10. Toward this, emphasize: *No speeches*, by leader or group member. No monopoly. After opening statement, limit individual contributions to a minute or so.

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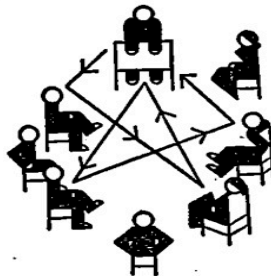
PROGRAM STUDY AND DISCUSSION SECTION

WASHINGTON, D. C.

## CARRYING ON

1. Make your own preparation for the discussion. Think the question through in advance. Aim to establish connections between ideas of background materials, and experience and ideas of group-members.
2. Aim at outset to get a sharply defined question before the group. Have three or four alternatives put on board if you think this will help: "Which do you want to start with?" "Is this question clear?"
3. In general, don't put questions to particular group-members, unless you see that an idea is trying to find words there anyway: "Mrs. Brown, you were about to say something." Otherwise: "Let's have some discussion of this question . . ." "What do some of the rest of you think about this?" "We've been hearing from the men. Now how do you women feel about this?" "What's been the experience of you folks up in the northern part of the State in this connection?" Etc.
4. Interrupt the "speech maker" as tactfully as possible: "While we're on this point, let's hear from some of the others. Can we save your other point till later?"
5. Keep discussion on the track; keep it always directed, but let the group lay its own track to a large extent. Don't groove it narrowly yourself. Try to have it

This way:



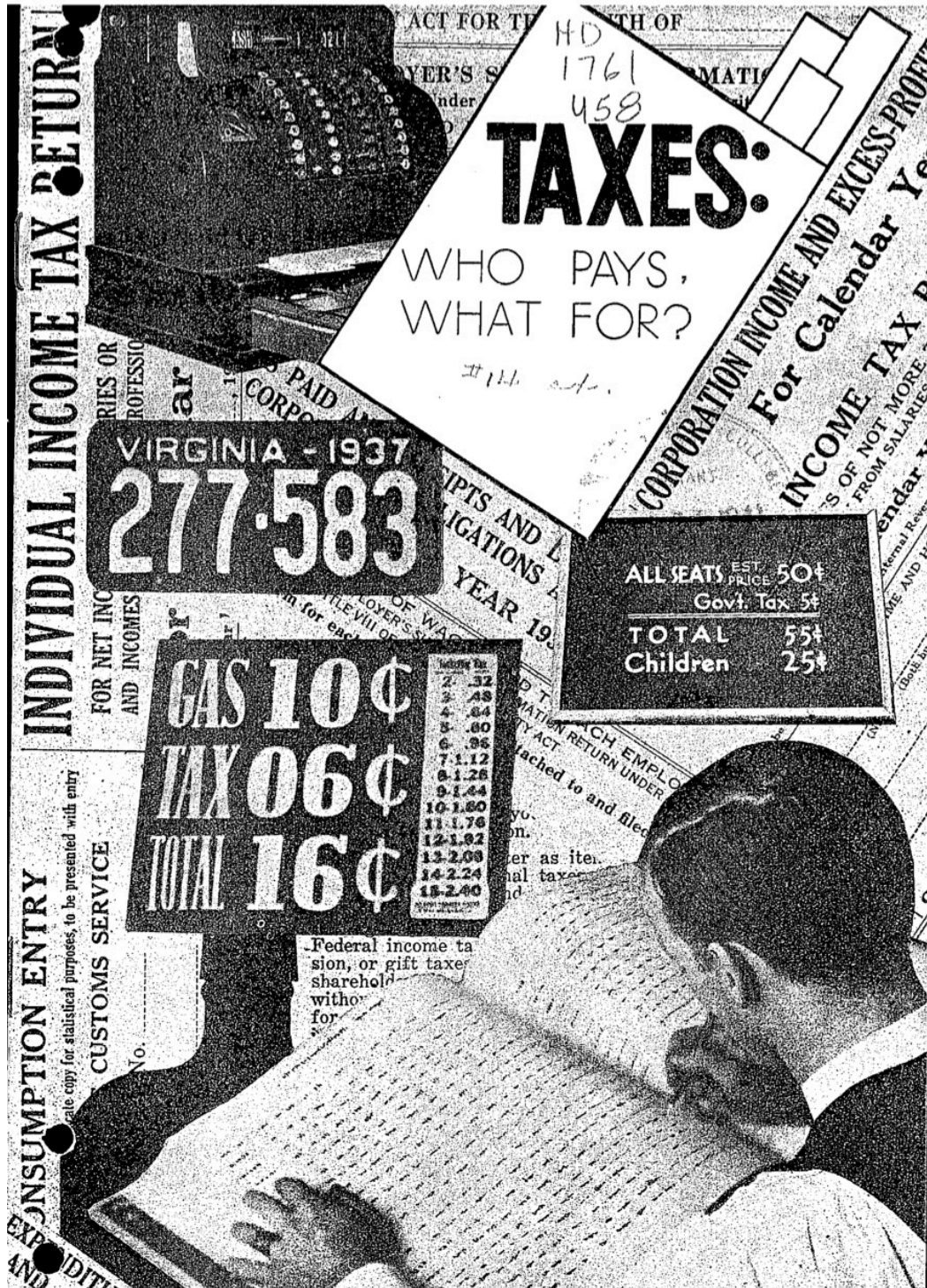
Not this way:



6. Remember: The leader's opinion doesn't count in the discussion. Keep your own view out of it. Your job is to get the ideas of others out for an airing.
7. If you see that some important angle is being neglected, point it out: "Bill Jones was telling me last week that he thinks . . . . . What do you think of that?"
8. Keep the spirits high. Encourage ease, informality, good humor. Let everybody have a good time. Foster *friendly* disagreement. Listen with respect and appreciation to all ideas, but stress what is important, and turn discussion away from what is not.
9. Take time every 10 minutes or so to draw the loose ends together: "Let's see where we've been going." Be as fair and accurate in summary as possible. Close discussion with summary—your own or the secretary's.
10. Call attention to unanswered questions for future study or for reference back to speakers. Nourish a desire in group members for continuing study and discussion through skillful closing summary.

## APPENDIX D

### FARMER DISCUSSION GROUP PAMPHLET DS- 9. TAXES: WHO PAYS, WHAT FOR?



This pamphlet has been especially prepared for use by discussion groups. Its purpose is to present, in brief form, some of the more important facts on the current tax situation, and some of the viewpoints which are the basis of current programs for revision of tax policy. No statement contained herein should be taken as an official expression by the Department of Agriculture.

The following questions are discussed:

- How many kinds of taxes are there?
- Who pays taxes?
- Why have taxes?
- What limits taxes?
- How should a tax system be judged?
- What tax proposals particularly concern farmers today?
- For what purposes should tax money be used?
- What tax schedule would best fit current needs?

Copies of this pamphlet may be obtained free upon request addressed to the Extension Service, U. S. Department of Agriculture, Washington, D. C. Other pamphlets have been similarly prepared and are similarly obtainable.

#### SUBJECT-MATTER PAMPHLETS FOR THE 1936-37 SEASON

- DS-1 What Should Be the Farmers' Share in the National Income?
- DS-2 How Do Farm People Live in Comparison with City People?
- DS-3 Should Farm Ownership Be a Goal of Agricultural Policy?
- DS-4 Exports and Imports—How Do They Affect the Farmer?
- DS-5 Is Increased Efficiency in Farming Always a Good Thing?
- DS-6 What Should Farmers Aim to Accomplish Through Organization?
- DS-7 What Kind of Agricultural Policy Is Necessary to Save Our Soil?
- DS-8 What Part Should Farmers in Your County Take in Making National Agricultural Policy?

#### SUBJECT-MATTER PAMPHLETS FOR THE 1937-38 SEASON

- DS-9 Taxes: Who Pays, What For?
- DS-10 Rural Communities: What Do They Need Most?
- DS-11 Soil Conservation: Who Gains By It?
- DS-12 Co-ops: How Far Can They Go?
- DS-13 Farm Finance: What Is a Sound System?
- DS-14 Crop Insurance: Is It Practical?
- DS-15 Reciprocal Trade Agreements: Hurting or Helping the Country?
- DS-16 Farm Security: How Can Tenants Find It?

#### PAMPHLETS ON THE DISCUSSION METHOD

- D-3 What Is the Discussion Leader's Job?

United States Department of Agriculture

The Extension Service and the  
Agricultural Adjustment Administration Cooperating  
September 1937

## TAXES: WHO PAYS, WHAT FOR?

When people hear the word taxes, the first taxes that come to mind are likely to be **property taxes**. Almost everybody will recall the line that forms in the courthouse at the office of the County Treasurer when taxes fall due.

On the other hand, the first taxes to come to mind might be **income taxes**, and how people spend a good many evenings before the 15th of March each year in the midst of a pile of check-books, receipted bills, ledgers and the like, filling out **personal income** tax returns—and work by day in their offices with similar figures on **corporate income** taxes.

### HOW MANY KINDS OF TAXES ARE THERE?

Both general property taxes and income taxes fall due on specified dates, from one to four times a year. A good many other taxes are paid irregularly, every day or every few days, and are collected by people other than revenue collectors. The girl at the motion picture window collects an **amusement tax** at the same time that she takes in the price of admission. The man at the service station collects **gasoline taxes** as well as the price of gas. In 23 states and two large cities, the cash registers at all retail stores ring up a **sales tax** along with the price of the article bought. The corks of liquor bottles and the flaps of cigarette boxes are held down by **revenue stamps**. Automobiles don't get very far on the highway without **license plates**. The walls of the offices of doctors, dentists, druggists and certain merchants have **licenses** posted on them. Lawyers are similarly licensed; their offices contain records of **estates, inheritances, gifts**, and other **transfers of property**, subject to taxation. Employers include **payroll taxes** in their records. Importers find customs men at ports and frontier posts ready to apply **tariff rates** to their incoming shipments. Even this list is far from complete. No wonder people say there's nothing certain in this world but death and taxes!





How many of the taxes just mentioned are paid in your community? What others are paid there?

#### WHO PAYS TAXES?

At first sight, the answer to this question seems easy. The people who hand over the cash or write out the checks pay them, of course. But do they? Or do the people who send in the money for some of these taxes collect it in turn from somebody else, so that the tax is shifted along the line?

For example, aren't rents usually set at rates to cover taxes and other expenses of landlords as well as to give them interest on their investment? Aren't some of the taxes on manufacturers, such as tobacco and liquor taxes, gasoline taxes, sales taxes, payroll taxes, likely to be passed forward to consumers in the form of higher retail prices? Or backward to producers—including farmers—in the form of lower prices for raw materials or lower wages for factory workers? Don't the customs duties that are levied under tariff laws on certain classes of foreign goods raise the prices paid in the home market by consumers of all goods of those classes?

In your opinion, what taxes in your community are finally paid by people other than those who hand the money over to the government?

#### WHY HAVE TAXES?

What is the purpose of all these different levies? In a self-governing country, people approve their tax system by their votes. What is it that American citizens want that makes them agree to pay so many taxes?

Two main purposes underlie most taxation:

1. To pay the cost of certain services which people believe the community should provide as a community rather than as individuals;
2. To control certain activities in the interest of the public welfare.

The primary purpose of the types of taxes that yield considerable sums of money is to raise revenue to meet local, state and national expenditures for:

The machinery of government: Legislatures, executive and administrative units, courts;

Defense: Army, navy, and police;

Education: Elementary schools, high schools, universities;  
Public welfare: Roads; public health; relief.

How much money is raised in your local tax district for local purposes each year? Is the amount increasing? What services are provided out of public funds in your vicinity? Should some of them be discontinued? Should others be added?

The primary purpose of certain taxes, on the other hand, is less to raise revenue than to insure certain standards of performance or to discourage activities which are looked upon as detrimental to the general welfare. Certain customs rates are levied primarily to check or stop the importation of various types of goods; certain excise taxes are laid chiefly to reduce sales of the taxed product by raising its price. Certain licensing provisions are intended to insure the maintenance of standards of sanitation, labor, professional performance, or the like. Certain transfer and license taxes are framed to discourage various types of business structure and business activity.

In your opinion, what taxes now levied belong in the class of taxes where control is as important as revenue? When has taxation for control been applied to farm products?

#### WHAT LIMITS TAXES?

Is the sky the limit on taxation? Or is the power to tax subject to certain restrictions? If subject to limitations, what are they?

**Political limitations.**—The principle applied by many politicians in search of money to carry on government has been reduced to common speech in the slogan, "The most feathers for the least squawking." If taxes are to be productive, they obviously must be applied where there is money. This gives rise to two rival slogans. People who have very little money say taxes should be laid on those with more money—in other words, "Soak the rich!" People who have a good deal of money in turn issue the warning, "Don't kill the goose that lays the golden egg!" In other words, don't tax those who make money so severely that they cease to put forth the effort necessary to make it.

Nobody enjoys paying taxes—almost everybody believes that the best tax is the one the other fellow pays.

When people are willing to pay taxes, their willingness is usually due to one of two causes. Either they are not conscious that they are being taxed, as is the case with many people who pay indirect taxes, or, although they realize what their taxes are, they pay willingly because they approve of the uses made of tax money.

Resistance to taxation is likely to come from groups whose members disapprove of the uses made of tax funds, or believe that they themselves are being subjected to sudden, excessive, or arbitrary tax levies. Politicians framing tax schedules have to measure the effect of such resistance at the polls.

What instances can you cite of organized political resistance to taxation? What instances can you cite where people have been willing to pay increased taxes because they believed in the purposes for which the money was to be spent?

**Economic limitations.**—With government budgets at their present levels, the effect of the tax bill on the people's welfare is obviously important. The tax system of a country may either advance or retard its economic progress. Practically 10½ billion dollars are being raised through taxation by the Federal and State governments and more than 175,000 local government units with taxing powers. National cash income paid out for 1936 was 62.1 billion dollars. In other words about one dollar in six was earmarked by some government unit. These figures emphasize the importance of a sound tax system. They emphasize the need for examining taxes to see:

1. Who really pays them—on what economic basis does our present tax system rest?
2. How does paying taxes under our present system affect people's capacity to spend—is it limiting the market for consumers' goods so sharply that the economic machine cannot function properly?
3. How does paying taxes under our present system affect people's capacity to save—is it limiting the market for stocks, bonds, mortgages and other means of providing producers' capital so sharply that the economic machine can not function properly?

**Constitutional limitations.**—In the United States, the laying of taxes is subject to definite constitutional safeguards, particularly in respect to the clause that occurs in both the fifth and the fourteenth Amendment to the Constitution, specifying that no person shall be deprived of property "without due process of law."

Further constitutional restriction on the laying of taxes is contained in the provision of Article I of the Constitution, that direct taxes (except income taxes, authorized by the sixteenth Amendment) may be laid by the Federal Government only in proportion to the population of the several States.

The taxing powers of the States are likewise limited. The Federal Constitution prohibits the laying of import and export duties by States, and a number of State constitutions provide that local units shall not tax above a given rate.

What constitutional limitations on the laying of taxes are in force in your community? Have these been recently changed?

#### HOW SHOULD A TAX SYSTEM BE JUDGED?

Clearly, there are a good many factors to be taken into account in judging a tax system. If the main purpose of a certain tax is to raise revenue, the most obvious question to ask would seem to be: How much revenue does it produce? Are there other taxes which would produce more?

If a further purpose of certain taxes is to exercise control, an appropriate question would seem to be: Are they in fact operating as control measures? Are there other taxes which would be more effective?

But people ask a great many other questions when they are judging tax systems. They advance various principles which they think should be considered in addition to the questions of productivity and effective control.

Many people insist that in a democratic country justice demands that the citizens share the tax burden in proportion to their **capacity to pay**, so that the cost of community

services may be equitably borne without falling more heavily on some members of the community than on others. They point to the graduated income tax, the rate of which increases as income increases, as an example of the best type of tax legislation; they point to a sales tax on necessities—a tax which some people have called “an upside down income tax”—as an example of the worst, because poor people spend a very large share of their income for necessities.

Another principle of taxation is that many of the services rendered by the government should be paid for by the users who **benefit** by the service rendered. According to this principle, automobile license fees and gas taxes are very satisfactory ways of paying for the public highways, and payroll taxes are similarly suitable for financing contributory old-age benefits. This principle usually is applied only to cases where the direct benefit to the individual seems greater than the general benefit to the community. For example, while most people think it is all right to have gas taxes to pay for roads in proportion to use, few would say that only families with children in school should pay school taxes.

A further principle of taxation which some people are eager to apply and others active to resist is that of using taxation for the **redistribution of wealth and income**. Those in favor, say that corporations have found ways of keeping big profits in the hands of just a few people, and ways of accumulating and hiding wealth which individual farmers or home owners cannot use. Those against, insist that a country where the income of a part of the people was used to support others who were shiftless and lazy just could not last.

Still another principle is advanced by the technicians whose job it is to make tax systems work. They want taxes to be considered with an eye to **simplicity of administration**. They point out that a tax which seems perfect from every other standpoint may still be an undesirable tax if it costs too much to collect or if the red tape of collections is so much bother that the persons or firms taxed become resentful.

What additional principles do you think should be kept in mind when judging a tax system? Do you regard those listed as sound? Why?

#### WHAT TAX PROPOSALS PARTICULARLY CONCERN FARMERS TODAY?

**Relative Importance of Income and Property Taxes.**—In recent years the general property tax, which originally was a tax on all property, has in most places become chiefly a tax on real property. You can't hide a farm in the closet, or cart it around from one State to another. Intangibles, such as stocks and bonds and mortgages, are difficult to reach with a general property tax. Income taxes have been increasingly adopted to reach wealth which otherwise might not contribute to the expenses of government. What do you think of the following statement:

"Furthermore, examination shows the 'ability' argument for the general property tax to be based on a false premise—namely, that individuals receive income in proportion to their property holdings. Contrast the circumstances of many professional and salaried men of today whose incomes run into tens, even hundreds of thousands of dollars, with the situation of many farmers who are 'land poor'—who own hundreds of acres of land but are barely able to wring a scanty livelihood from them. . . .

"In a community where there are no sharp inequalities in wealth and where the mass of property is of a tangible, readily assessable character, the worst injustices of the general property tax do not develop. Tinkering and patching can soften such abuses as do arise. **Given a good administration, the general property tax may well prove a satisfactory method of taxation in states of an essentially agricultural character.** As a community becomes more industrialized, as the distribution of wealth and income diverges, and as the intangible forms of property values increase in importance, the mal-adjustments of a general property tax becomes more glaring. **It is an open question whether the injustices of the general property tax in industrial states do not outweigh its revenue possibilities.**"—American Public Finance and Taxation, W. J. Schultz, pp. 426-428.

What were the chief sources of income of your State and local governments last year? Do you think your State and local budgets could be more easily and equitably financed if more reliance were placed on income taxes and less on property taxes? If so, should the law provide for the taxation of income which farmers received in kind, such as



"rent" in the form of use of farm houses, and "income" in the form of produce raised and consumed on the farm?

**Homestead exemptions.**—What do you think of this general conclusion on homestead exemptions, reached by a research group whose report was recently issued:

"Exemptions under the property tax have been touched on above. It may be added, however, that from the point of view of a just distribution of the tax burden we can see no merit in the homestead exemptions recently adopted in Florida and several other states. The most obvious injustice in such exemptions is that they discriminate against the tenant, who must bear in his rent at least part of the real estate tax burden on his dwelling, and favor the person who happens to be able and willing to own his home."—Facing the Tax Problem, 20th Century Fund, Inc., p. 412.

**Are homestead exemptions in effect in your State?**

**Zoning of agricultural land.**—Zoning of agricultural land is not primarily a tax measure. But one of its main purposes is to diminish the cost of providing schools, roads, and other services by keeping people who move into sparsely settled agricultural areas from scattering themselves so far and wide that the cost of roads and schools is excessive. Do you approve of zoning as thus defined:

"In general, however, zoning will have for its purpose either or both of the following:

1. Control and suppression of uses of land or buildings which have a ruinous effect on established property values in the immediate vicinity.
2. Control or suppression of uses of land or buildings which would result in wasteful expenditure of the tax moneys paid by other taxpayers in the same taxing unit . . .

"In a growing state, and in a growing community, zoning offers an opportunity to control or prevent uses either harmful to property values or burdensome to other taxpayers."—Making the Best Use of Wisconsin Land Through Zoning, Extension Service, College of Agriculture, University of Wisconsin, Madison, Wis.

**Are zoning regulations in effect in your State?**

**Capitalization of Land Taxes.**—Attention is frequently called to the fact that when land changes hands, the seller is likely to assume the burden of such taxes as can be reasonably anticipated, in the form of selling values lower than would have been obtainable if future taxes were not figured in. That is, where taxes are high in relation to taxes in other areas, the buyer is not willing to pay as much

for the land. In other words, the state acquires an interest in the property at the expense of the old owners.

In your community, what are the answers to the questions asked in the following quotation:

"If the tax on land has been widely capitalized, the implications for practical action in the direction of relief to real estate are of extreme importance. If the extent of that capitalization could be even approximately determined a standard would be provided below which it would seem to be undesirable to reduce the prevailing rates of the land tax. Have purchases and sales of land taken place in recent years in the presence of an expectation of a given level of tax rates? On what scale have transfers been made since the establishment of the present level of tax rates? To what extent is the land still in the possession of those who owned it when the present rates became established and to what extent has it passed into the hands of new owners?"—Report of the New York State Commission for the Revision of the Tax Laws. Legislative Document (1932) No. 77.

Can you name instances of land-tax capitalization in recent sales in your neighborhood?

**Taxation as an aid in obtaining agricultural adjustment.**—Taxation has been used in connection with agricultural policies in recent years as part of the old AAA programs and the Bankhead (Cotton) and Kerr-Smith (Tobacco) Acts. The processing taxes were devised as revenue measures providing money for benefit payments to make possible agricultural adjustment programs. The Bankhead and Kerr-Smith taxes were laid for the purpose of control. Neither type of tax is now in operation. Here are two quotations on the subject of the use of the tax power in relation to agriculture:

"The absolute power to lay taxes includes the power in every form in which it may be used, and for every purpose to which the legislature may choose to apply it. This results from the very nature of such an unrestricted power. A fortiori it might be applied by Congress to purposes for which nations have been accustomed to apply it. Now, nothing is more clear, from the history of commercial nations, than the fact that the taxing power is often, very often, applied for other purposes than revenue. It is often applied as a regulation of commerce. It is often applied as a virtual prohibition upon the importation of particular articles for the encouragement and protection of domestic products and industry; for the support of agriculture, commerce, and manufactures; for retaliation upon foreign monopolies and injurious restrictions; for mere purposes of state policy and domestic economy; sometimes to banish a noxious article of consumption; sometimes as a bounty upon an infant manufacture or agricultural product; sometimes as a temporary restraint of trade; sometimes as a suppression of particular employments; sometimes as a prerogative power to de-



stroy competition, and secure a monopoly to the government."—Commentaries on the Constitution, Joseph Story, 5th ed., Vol. 1, section 965.

The following is an extract from the opinion of Chief Justice Taft in *Hill v. Wallace*, 259 U. S. 44, at page 66:

"It is impossible to escape the conviction, from a full reading of this law, that it was enacted for the purpose of regulating the conduct of business of boards of trade through supervision of the Secretary of Agriculture and the use of an administrative tribunal consisting of that Secretary, the Secretary of Commerce, and the Attorney General. Indeed, the title of the act recites that one of its purposes is the regulation of boards of trade . . . The manifest purpose of the tax is to compel boards of trade to comply with regulations, many of which can have no relevancy to the collection of the tax at all . . . The act is in essence and on its face a complete regulation of boards of trade, with a penalty of 20 cents a bushel on all 'futures' to coerce boards of trade and their members into compliance. When this purpose is declared in the title to the bill, and is so clear from the effect of the provisions of the bill itself, it leaves no ground upon which the provisions we have been considering can be sustained as a valid exercise of the taxing power. The elaborate machinery for hearings by the Secretary of Agriculture and by the commission of violations of these regulations, with the withdrawal by the commission of the designation of the board as a contract market, and of complaints against persons who violate the act or such regulations, and the imposition upon them of the penalty of requiring all boards of trade to refuse to permit them the usual privileges, only confirm this view."

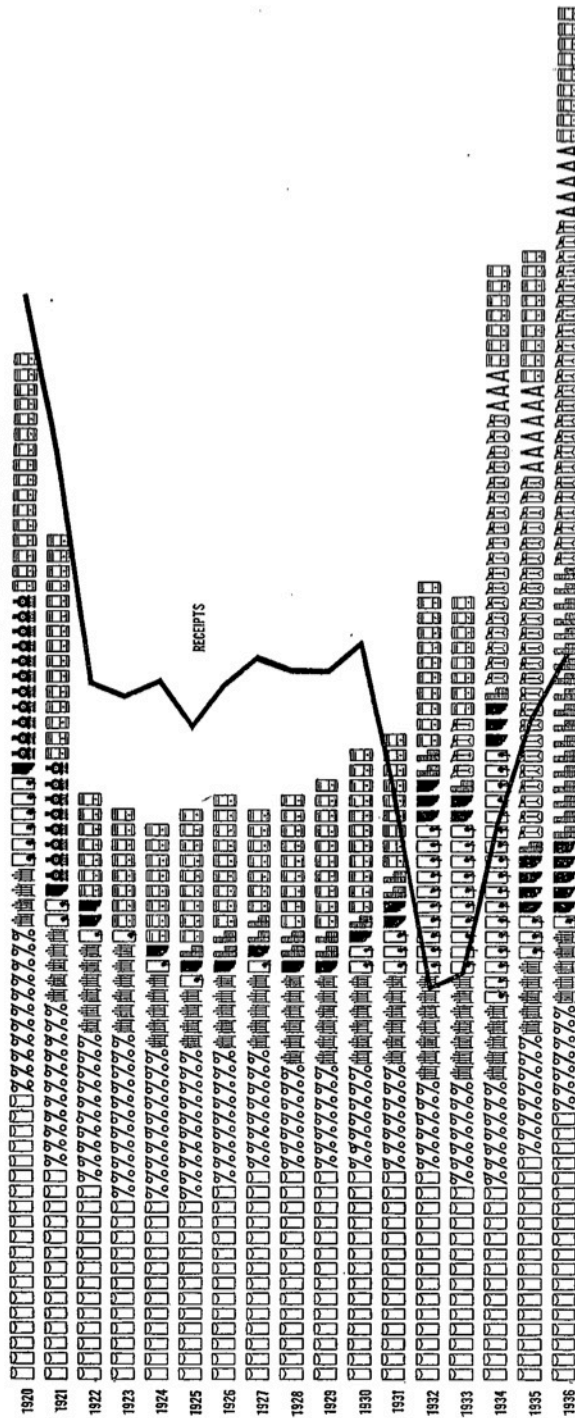
What do you think of the general principle of using the tax power to improve the agricultural situation?

#### FOR WHAT PURPOSES SHOULD TAX MONEY BE USED?

Most people agree upon the necessity of certain minimum expenditures on the part of government for schools, roads, defense, and the like. But they often disagree as to how much should be spent for these services, and as to what other services should be provided chiefly or wholly at public expense.

For example, to what extent should social security benefits be provided by the government? To what extent should health services be provided by the government? To what extent should the government be concerned with the ups and downs of business? Should it assume certain extraordinary powers comparable to war powers during depressions, and then withdraw from the economic field as conditions improve? Or should the government act as a balance wheel in both good and bad times? Or should

# FEDERAL GOVERNMENT EXPENDITURES AND RECEIPTS, 1920-1936



it assume a considerable measure of control and direction of economic activities? Do average citizens need more help through government now than a hundred years ago?

#### WHAT TAX SCHEDULE WOULD BEST FIT CURRENT NEEDS?

Federal, State and local governments are spending about 17½ billions a year at present. About 1¼ billions of this amount is being raised through income-producing activities; about 10½ billions through taxes; the remainder through borrowing.

What proposals would you make with regard to these budgets? What items do you regard as most important and how much money should be allowed for each of them?

In your opinion, where are the biggest leaks in our tax expenditures? How can we find out whether our taxes are spent efficiently?

Are you familiar with the various proposals that have recently been made with regard to government reorganization, Federal, State and local? How would they affect the tax system and the tax bill?

Which of the taxes mentioned at the beginning of this pamphlet would you include in an ideal tax schedule? In what proportion would you rely on them?

## MORE ABOUT TAXES

In the preceding pages, the farm tax problem has been treated as part of the national tax problem. Groups of farmers who are discussing taxes, however, will doubtless wish to consider in detail the particular taxes that they pay. A series of useful charts on this subject is contained in "A Graphic Summary of Farm Taxation," U. S. Department of Agriculture, Misc. Publication No. 262, on sale at \$0.05, by the Superintendent of Documents, Washington, D. C. Figure 1 shows the sources of the tax dollar paid by farmers; Figure 2, the variations since 1913 in gross farm income, farm real estate value per acre, and tax per acre; Figures 13 and 14, uses of farm-property taxes in various states; Figure 15, farm gasoline taxes and automobile licenses per farm; Figures 23 and 24, rural real estate tax delinquency. 1928-32.

Publications presenting State-wide facts and figures on such subjects as: farm income and taxes; tax trends; sales valuation and assessed valuation; rural tax delinquency; government costs and taxes; taxation and ability to pay; comparative tax burdens of farm and city, are available from the Agricultural Experiment Stations and State Agricultural Colleges of most States. Commissions on reorganization of State and local governments have made reports in many States.

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FARM REAL ESTATE TAXES: A DISCUSSION, E. Englund. The Agricultural Situation, March, 1937. Superintendent of Documents, Washington, D. C. \$0.05.

## APPENDIX F

### TYPICAL PROGRAM FOR SCHOOLS OF PHILOSOPHY

What follows is a typical structure for Schools of Philosophy as outlined by Carl F. Taeusch in 1941.<sup>727</sup> In his report, Taeusch offered insight into the usual procedure for organizing Schools. Schools were organized only in response to an invitation from the state or other local unit. Dates and meeting place were arranged to suit the local group or person in charge, usually the State Director of Extension, who also determined what persons were to attend the School. A typical program, as outlined below, was often modified somewhat to respond to local circumstances, but overall it was usually accepted overall as the basis for individual School programs, especially for the first School to be held in a state or for a particular group.

Next, a list of possible staff lecturers would be sent the person in charge locally. This list consisted of the names, fields of interest, and institutions of those persons who had participated in previous Schools. Those locally in charge of the prospective School could have other names in mind and they would be asked to exercise complete freedom in making suggestions as to the staff desired. The PSD would then proceed to assemble the staff and organize the program.

#### **First Day: Backgrounds**

1. What Can Philosophy Contribute to a Better Understanding of the Present Situation?
2. General Social and Economic Background of the Present Situation.
3. Immediate Backgrounds of Present Agricultural Policies and Programs.

#### **Second Day: The Place of Government in Modern Society**

1. Individualism, Democracy and Social Control.
2. The Relation of Government to Social and Economic Affairs.
3. The Problem of Continuing a Program of Agricultural Adjustment.

#### **Third Day: Regionalism, Nationalism and Internationalism**

1. Unity and Diversity in Society.
2. Political and Economic Considerations.
3. A Desirable Foreign Trade Policy for American Agriculture.

#### **Fourth Day: Problems of Social Adjustment and Administration**

1. Psychological Problems in Social Adjustment.
2. Democracy and Group Leadership, or Traditional Economics and our Present Economy.
3. Sanctions, or An Educational Program for the Future.

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<sup>727</sup> Taeusch, *Report on the Schools of Philosophy for Agricultural Leaders*, 4, 5.

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